New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index

World War III, caused in Russia by Fiamma, the final member of the Roman Catholic Church's secret group God's Right Seat, was brought to an end thanks to the efforts of Kamijou Touma. However, he disappeared at the end of that war.

This is a world without that hero.

The magic side is being reorganized and improved, and days of rest have arrived for its believers.

In the headquarters of the science side, Academy City, Accelerator, the strongest Level 5, has cut his ties with the darkness and is now living a noisy but calm normal life with Last Order and Misaka Worst. Not a sign of Group remains.

With the material for negotiating with the darkness in hand, Hamazura Shiage, a former Skill-Out Level 0, has returned from Russia and formed a new Item with Kinuhata, Takitsubo, and the returned Mugino. They have begun their activities once more.

Those graduates of the darkness have obtained peace and quiet. That is, until the brutal Freshmen appear before them.

The New Testament begins!

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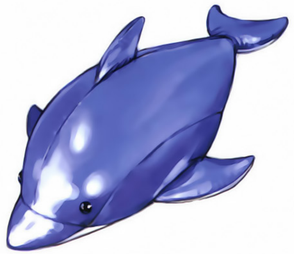

Kamachi Kazuma

And now we're back at #1 again.
I have no idea how long this is going to last, but please stick with me.

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Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
Toaru Majutsu no Index SS 1 & 2
New Testament Toaru Majutsu no Index
Heavy Object
Heavy Object: Adoption War
Heavy Object: Shadow of the Giants

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I'm originally from Onomichi City of Hiroshima Prefecture. Now I live in a certain area of Kantou living a half hikikomori life while drawing illustrations.

カバー／暁印刷

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

鎌池和馬　イラスト／はいむらきよたか

"Green Peas. Nyahh."

Pursued Girl Fremea Seivelun

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War?

City.

Dream.

Girl.

Black.

Knight(s).

Witch.

"How about you take a seat? This is the café's recommended tea. How about you try some?"

Girl who loves plastic dolphin dolls

Kuroyoru Umidori

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)

"That's a horrible way to talk about someone."
A Level 0 who went from being an underling to a proper member of the new Item
Hamazura Shiage
"Hamazura, you're too slow."
Member of the new Item and Academy City's #4 Level 5, Meltdowner
Mugino Shizuri
"C'mon, give it a rest. After all, Hamazura is super Hamazura-y.
As the adults here, we need to super put up with him."
Member of the new Item and Level 4 Offense Armor
Kinuhata Saiai
"...Zzz..."
Member of the new Item and Level 4 AIM Stalker
Takitsubo Rikou

"How do you like this peace you've brought back?"
Clone of Misaka Mikoto created by the Sisters Third Season
Misaka Worst
"It's a pain in the ass..."
Academy City's strongest Level 5 who has escaped the darkness
Accelerator

TOARU MAJUTSU NO INDEX NEW TESTAMENT

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

KAMACHI KAZUMA
鎌池和馬
イラスト・はいむらきよたか
HAIMURA KIYOTAKA

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PROLOGUE

The People Who Became the Protagonists by Some Kind of Mistake.

War?

"Quenser! The same guy from last time appeared again! It's an Object! That strange weapon really exists!! What do we do now, can anti-tank shells work against it!?"

"Isn't that obvious, Heivia? We can only do that!!"

"Okay... oi oi!! How did you end up with that conclusion? Anyone can tell that it's stupid!! The enemy's a monster with a 50+ m main body and 100+ cannons of all sizes! Besides, that's not a machine that can be stopped with one or two direct hits from a nuclear bomb! That thing will destroy everything just by walking whether we shoot at it or not!!"

"You know the main cannon? It's that stupidly-huge lower-stability-type ion cannon. The inside of the cannon is completely hollow, and the heat it produces will blow it off if a magnetic field isn't used to protect it... so you're telling me there's no way? A way to interfere with the inside of that main cannon!?"

"Oh? I suddenly thought of something good. I'm great! Wait, am I a genius!?"

"What now, Heivia?"

"Perfect. This is absolutely perfect!! If we do this, Quenser and I will definitely be saved!!"

"JUST HURRY UP AND SAY IT!!"

"Go into the battlefield and act dead."

"GO GET STOMPED TO DEATH, YOU BASTARD!!!"[1]

♦

[1] The above is from **HEAVY OBJECT**, another series written by the author of this series.

"..."

Staring at the large screen, Hamazura's hand that was holding a popcorn container inadvertently shuddered.

He had made the wrong choice.

This stupid movie wasn't meant to be watched with a lover.

"Well, it's just a Kinuhata-style movie that Kinuhata recommended."

The one who said this was the "lover" beside him.

Her name was Takitsubo Rikou.

Even though it was an occasion like going out to watch a movie in a cinema, she was still wearing a pink sports jacket. She would most likely wear this even to a wedding ceremony or a funeral.

To Takitsubo, the most important thing about choosing clothes was comfort. However, Hamazura honestly wished that an ero swimsuit or a bunny suit would replace her sports jacket.

Right now, Rikou, with a look that showed that she had lost half of her patience with the movie, said,

"Hamazura, what do we do next?"

Unfortunately, they didn't have much "time" left after the next meal; they had to meet up with Mugino and Kinuhata. They had to finish "that thing last time" no matter what.

That's the case, Hamazura pondered.

His mind wasn't focused on the battle scene on the screen in front of him, but the "real" war that he knew of.

"...Somehow managed to survive World War III."

As for who the most active character was, there was no way to tell.

CHAPTER 1

A Peaceful Academy City Without "Him".

City.

Part 1

Academy City.

This was a place that was developed from the undeveloped land of western Tokyo. It was one-third the size of Tokyo, and there was a tall wall surrounding it. 80% of its population of 2.3 million consisted of students. Besides being the pinnacle city of academia and the ubiquitous all-around study of science and technology, there was another side to it—the psychic powers development institution that was achieved through artificial means and scientific processes.

Targeted at the students, the "powers" developed would differ into many types according to each person's scenario. Each ability would then be sorted according to the ability's value, power, and practicality, into six different levels: People with No Powers (Level 0), People with Weak Powers (Level 1), People with Unusual Powers (Level 2), People with Strong Powers (Level 3), People with Great Powers (Level 4), and People with Super Powers (Level 5).

As a side note, Hamazura Shiage was a Level 0.

Strictly speaking, he was under the "power couldn't be viewed by the naked eye, though it seemed like he still could use some of it" level. However, that was not something that we can tell. It seemed like the vague existence where the Level 0 espers stood.

But it was too early to despair just like that.

This man had the rarest experience of passing through the most intense area during World War III. Also, he had the experience of beating the 4th Level 5 by himself. He managed to live through the battle and chaos in the world for the girl he loved, so right now, he had slightly surpassed the status of being an "ordinary high school student".

The man who protected a village in an intense warzone from being overrun by Russian forces, fought back several assassins from Academy City, and returned from the battlefield with great rewards.

But for this End of the Century Emperor HAMAZURA to return to ordinary everyday life...

“HAMAZURA!! HOW LONG DO YOU NEED TO BUY THAT SPORTS DRINK!?”

The girl whose shout echoed throughout the restaurant caused Hamazura Shiage, who had several glass cups in his hand, to jerk his shoulders suddenly.

...Nothing, nothing changed at all!! Such a thing definitely happened, but my life hasn't changed one bit!!!!

Though the End of the Century Emperor complained as he was converted back into a mess boy, this was life. No matter how much battle experience he gained, a minor character could only move on as a minor character.

As a side note, the one who prompted for a drink was Mugino Shizuri.

It would take a long time for us to discuss her story, but anyway, she was the #4 Level 5. She was a girl with a tall and slender figure to go with her soft brown hair. One-third of her face was artificially treated with cosmetics, and one of her eyeballs was fake.

There were two other girls sitting around the table.

One of them was Kinuhata Saiai. This short, short-haired middle schooler was wearing a woolen dress. She was a girl that zealously believed in revealing her thighs, often researching ways to unknowingly but definitely reveal them.

The other was Takitsubo Rikou, the girl who had gone out to watch the movie with Hamazura just now. If one really had to define her characteristics, it was her black shoulder-length hair and the pink sports jacket that she would always wear.

Kinuhata seemed to be viewing a forum through her cell phone, but quickly got bored of things like “reconstruction of the warzones in Russia and Academy City is deploying troops”. She tossed her cell phone away and focused on the French fries on the huge plate. Kinuhata then tossed a fry into her mouth and used her other hand to gently stroke the special makeup on Mugino's face.

“...I can't tell even when we're so close right now. Forget about the wound; I can't even see the eye bag. What kind of unique cosmetic surgery is this? It's just like it got photo edited; I can't even super tell the difference!”

“Since I won't sweat, my pores won't change normally. The skin color won't change according to temperature, and there won't be any goosebumps. I can already feel the difference just by staying around in normal environments. Even if it's too refreshing, it's not something that one can feel close about... I say, why were you rattling on about special cosmetics?”

“Well, in this era that uses CG effects to super add moles or scars or wings or horns, it’s amazing that they can even use special cosmetics to create such an effect. My burning passion movie fan blood is past boiling point already!! I can already feel my blood super burn up by watching those old weirdo-chasing-after-someone movie feeling!” **(?)**

…I don’t really want to approach them…

Hamazura thought honestly, but if they kept that up, a certain person may really tear off her makeup and become a homicidal maniac.

However, when he delivered the drinks,

“You’re too slow, Hamazura!! And what’s this!? Put ice in it properly! Wouldn’t the drinks not remain chilled when you brought them over!? It’s a basic beverage rule to redo it!!”

“Ma, don’t be like this. Hamazura’s super Hamazura. Besides, it’ll take quite a while to redo it. As adults, we have to super endure it, you know.”

“Seems like I got bad-mouthed heavily.”

Hamazura sighed and turned to look at the only girl who was not attacking.

“Since they have so many things to grumble about, regarding that, my princess who isn’t complaining at all is still my best partner, right, Takitsubo? Takitsubo?”

Hamazura looked like he was searching for the final straw of life as he said this to his lover. But right now, her eyes were wide open and not moving at all.

“...She’s sleeping...”

“Sle-sleeping!? The date that lasted until just now must have made you tired, right!?”

“Well, since she went out with Hamazura, it super can’t be helped, right? It’d be weird if she didn’t feel bored.”

“IT’S BECAUSE YOU INTRODUCED THAT MOVIE! YOU ACTUALLY INTRODUCED SUCH A STUPID MOVIE!!”

“At the climax right before the end, the super huge image of the Indian elephant jumping together with all the members was the super best. Right, Hamazura?”

“That’s the hardest part to understand...”

The nonsensical crazed movie fan Kinuhata seemed to be unable to understand Hamazura's feelings as he cupped his head.

She took a sip from the drink that Hamazura had brought over, and said with 100% dissatisfaction,

"...Like what Mugino super said, this temperature far exceeds what a drink should be. I unhappily super propose a punishment game."

After that, Mugino gently picked the tableware beside her that had deep-fried butter salmon (sort of like a metallic frying pan), and said in a ridiculous tone that sounded like one selling a cute cat,

"Then~ How about we take turns slapping Hamazura-chan on the face~?"

"STOP USING SUCH A SICKENINGLY SCARY VOICE!! ANYWAY, I'M SEVERELY AFFECTED BY JUST THAT ICY TONE OF YOURS! YOU'RE MAKING ME ALL CHILLY IN THE BACK!!"

Hamazura inadvertently shouted out in agony, but in contrast, Kinuhata just sighed slightly.

"No way. That'll just super praise Hamazura. That guy will only be thinking of making people wear naked aprons or anything super sexually stimulating."

"THIS IS SUCH A TERRIFYING FAMILY!! YOU TWO, I'LL GET GOOSEBUMPS IF I HEAR THE WORD 'FAMILY' AGAIN, GOT IT!? BESIDES, IT'S EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO EVEN THINK OF A NAKED BODY IN THAT SITUATION!!"

Sitting opposite, Kinuhata covered her ears with an irritated expression on her face in response to Hamazura's roars. But maybe because her elbow touched it, the third-rate movie ticket that was placed on the table fell down Kinuhata's knee, and landed on the floor.

"SUPER HAMAZUUURRRRAAA!!!!"

"Why is it my fault again!!? ...Got it, got it, I'll pick it up, I'll pick it up, okay!? So please don't go about using your Level 4 powers at will inside this shop!!"

Mr. Laborer Hamazura Shiage sighed as he got down below the table. He spotted the target, the thin ticket, immediately. There were the words "Wildman's N Zombie Escape Madness". Was this the original title or some randomly translated gibberish? Not interested in this movie at all, Hamazura looked away from the movie ticket.

And right now, it was the absolute frontal. The scene of Kinuhata Saiai's thighs that had the mini-woolen skirt and the cute piece of cloth covering the base were right in front of Hamazura.

Over here,

If it was a man who could live his life to the fullest, whether it be work or personal life, a man who could perfectly handle some unexpected things in his life, he may have merely been amused about slightly touching someone else's thighs.

But Hamazura was super Hamazura.

With unlimited shock, he jumped upwards.

"Kinuha- Owww!!"

BAM!! With a huge sound, that idiot knocked his head against the table.

The victims were Mugino Shizuri, who was carelessly holding her drink with one hand, and Takitsubo Rikou, who was sleeping with her eyes wide open.

The more accurate way to describe it was that the drink in Mugino's cup drenched Takitsubo.

Takitsubo widened her eyes and gradually gathered her focus.

"...Hamazura...?"

"She didn't manage to collect enough information, and she doesn't look sleepy at all. Seems like she's thinking of me as the culprit no matter what. Why must I have such things happen around me?"

Shakily standing up after getting the ticket from under the table, Hamazura witnessed something shocking.

Completely drenched, Takitsubo muttered, "Really," as she took off her sports jacket.

Under the sports jacket were two hills forced down by a single undershirt.

"*...As expected, they're big.*"

"*...No, in the overall sense, my super body figure is better.*"

"*...Oh, no, got to calm down.*"

Only Takitsubo was looking around with those blurry eyes of hers.

Without any emotional expression, she said,

“It’s about time we leave, isn’t it?”

“Ye... well. We finished the small bites; we’re about to enter the super main point soon.”

“Mm.”

Mugino looked somewhat bored, replying simply with a voice that didn’t fit her personality.

Hamazura stood up.

“So, you know where the place is?”

“About that, I super checked it before. But speaking of which, it super only exists in District 10.”

“Then let’s go, shall we?”

Mugino said in a cold tone.

Hamazura carefully probed the tone.

“Is it alright?”

“Yes.”

They were originally members of this small group called “Item”, but right now, the team was no longer complete. One person who was supposed to be there was missing.

As if she was trying to emphasize the peace with this absentee, Mugino said softly,

“...Let’s hurry up and finish our visit to Frenda’s grave.”

Part 2

The moment they met again, she first gave him a fierce punch.

After that, she hugged him tightly.

The strongest Level 5 esper who came back from the heated warzone of World War III, Accelerator, was treated with such a feeling.

As a side note, the one who punched him and hugged him was the female teacher in sports attire called Yomikawa Aiho.

Accelerator was currently residing in her apartment.

His unique white hair did not have any color in it, and his abnormally red eyes had the presence of a beast. His thin, line-like body was supported by a modernistic cane, but it was unlikely to contribute to the “skinny” impression that Accelerator gave off.

This was a body that was thoroughly trained through the latest of scientific influences, the weapon called an esper.

No matter whether it was punching him or hugging him, there were likely only a few people in Academy City who could do such a “human” thing to him.

Also, there were others of “these few people” inside this spacious apartment.

For example,

“‘Ah!! Why is there an attack of intense distorted light from front, back, left, right, up, down, all directions!?’ says Misaka as Misaka is trembling on seeing this terrifying stereo!!”

The girl who looked about ten, Last Order, shouted some strange words as she grabbed onto the gamepad tightly with both hands.

“Kukuku, the lasers are Misaka’s final trump card to prevent you from running around... Large Laser!!”

This was a girl that had a similar face as Last Order’s, but was grown up as a high schooler and essentially a darker version, Misaka Worst.

“...Is that another clone that was produced in a plan I didn’t know of...?”

Looking somewhat surprised by Misaka Worst’s presence was the female researcher Yoshikawa Kikyou.

Speaking of which, because of several things that had happened, Misaka Worst’s arm was fractured. But right now, she was holding the handle of the gamepad with one hand as she continued to swamp Last Order who was holding the gamepad with both hands (the disadvantageous L and R toggles were ignored).

This was the solo performance of Misaka Worst, who for some reason was wearing a pink-white ao dai[2].

"'Ohh, if so, Misaka will use the network created by the Misaka brainwaves to issue a command!' says Misaka as Misaka tries to, but why isn't it working!?"

"Fufufu, the Third Production Plan had all sorts of mechanisms put inside Misaka's body to resist your command."

Both of them continued in their own conversation.

"'Speaking of which, where did you get that ethnic costume?' asks Misaka as Misaka tries to inquire."

"? Really? Is this Misaka's memory not stored inside the MISAKA network because of the command resistance?"

"I gave it to her."

The researcher Yoshikawa replied for Misaka Worst who didn't look like she intended to answer given the evil look on her face.

"I won it in a lucky draw, but the measurements don't really fit me."

So that was why Misaka Worst, who had that evil and mocking look on her face, had this pink and white clothing. But that wasn't what Last Order was complaining about.

"'...And she's showing off an adult's chest,' says Misaka as Misaka tries to remain alert."

"I'm not talking about that; I'm talking about all the factors, including the waist and the buttocks. Speaking of which, if we're just talking about bust line, isn't that child's bigger?"

Last Order then looked away from the gaming console screen and silently stared at the girl in the ao dai beside her, Misaka Worst.

She then said,

"'Let's hope so,' says Misaka as Misaka tries to clench her fist."

"No, Misaka was created from the Third Production Plan, so the growth accelerant should be different, isn't it?"

[2] A traditional Vietnamese dress, now the country's national costume.

Clack clack clack clack clack!! Last Order angrily slammed the gamepad, but her character in the screen continued to be pummeled.

Seeing the two girls talking to each other disharmoniously, Yomikawa frowned.

“Then who’s that high school student? Is she the kid’s elder sister?”

“No.”

The one who answered wasn’t Accelerator, but Misaka Worst.

While waiting for the outcome of the game battle, the girl turned her head to where Yomikawa was and closed one eye.

Using a tone that seemed to indicate that she was treating everyone as an idiot, she said,

“No matter what anyone says, Misaka’s that kid’s younger sister, right?”

“?”

Part 3

“Parameter List”.

This thing had the personal database of Hamazura Shiage, who clashed against the dark side of Academy City, and the people around him. Hamazura considered how much damage it could cause to Academy City if it were used differently, but at the same time, he knew that he couldn’t get away with it.

Originally, there was a 20-30 year gap in technology between Academy City and the “outside”, and there was a lot of information that the research institutes didn’t want to release “within” the city. Even if one were to collect information, the system would definitely pick up extremely sensitive information.

Besides, Hamazura didn’t intend to.

Since his goal wasn’t to take down Academy City, but to live a peaceful life there.

In order to ensure his own safety, he even had the option to leave the city.

But right now, he wasn’t ready to make that move yet.

The girl whose life was more important than his own, Takitsubo Rikou, had to undergo treatment in Academy City because of a certain incident.

Then.

There were many equipment and facilities in Academy City that other cities didn't have. There were wind-powered electrical generators, security and cleaning robots on patrol, and "food production factories" meant for livestock and agriculture everywhere in the city.

However, there were other differences as well.

In this city, there were overwhelmingly few cemeteries.

80% of the population staying here were students who had left their parents to stay in the dorms. Even if they were dead (because of cremation disposal, it was impossible to guarantee a DNA verification), their corpses would normally be returned to the parents. In other words, there was no basic requirement to have a graveyard here.

The only graveyard in Academy City was located in District 10, and its shape was similar to that of an elevator-equipped multi-story parking garage.

It was a structure that used the power of lifts to automatically pass the miniature tombstone that had the cinerary casket within it. For this to work, the input of a number was required in the "small space" that was separated by the clapboard like a shooting range.

As long as the thick waterproof tray allowed it, any flowers and gifts were allowed. But when the system detected any microbes, once it passed a certain limit, it would be dumped into the dustbin automatically.

As was mentioned earlier, it was rare to find the ashes of students here.

In other words, it was likely that the dead who were placed here had no name at all.

Criminals, those abandoned ones known as "Child Errors" who had been placed in homes, and those involved in the dark side that had been erased from the "surface".

"...That Mugino is so slow."

Shiage grumbled as he muttered.

They hadn't entered the "graveyard" tower, but were sitting at the bench near the entrance, which didn't carry any sentimental feeling. Most likely, it was a place to let people smoke, but the ashtray that no one was using increased the loneliness.

Mugino was the only one who had entered the “graveyard”.

The one person who had personally killed Frenda was Mugino herself.

Most likely, there were a lot of words to be said.

There was no intention to listen to what she had to say, nor was there an intention to peek at that face.

Hamazura lazily looked up at the sky and said,

“Frenda, what did she like when she was alive?”

“Mackerel.”

The one who answered was Takitsubo, who was sitting beside him.

Kinuhata also sighed,

“She super looked like she liked to eat cans. She used to not worry about money.”

There was still a little uncomfortable feeling about describing someone in the past tense.

Did they wish for this to disappear, or not?

For an immature Hamazura, it was too early for him to decide.

Part 4

The video game ended in Misaka Worst’s overwhelming victory, and Last Order was left pouting as she put the gamepad down.

Last Order, who had the appearance of a ten-year-old, rolled about on the floor. She pointed at a certain part of Misaka Worst and said,

“‘Those breasts diverted Misaka’s attention,’ says Misaka as Misaka tries to analyze the reason for her defeat.”

“Oya, mocking other people’s features to vent your own anger, Misaka really feels that the commander’s one of the Misakas. Your personality is so dark, so dark☆”

Even though Misaka Worst was taunting her, Last Order didn't mind. She turned to the cloning researcher beside her, Yoshikawa Kikyou.

"'Please tell Misaka what Misaka has to eat to grow that big,' says Misaka as Misaka wants an open report."

"Everyone's eating the same thing, they're all made by Aiho."

Aiho, who was also the owner of this apartment, would be the PE teacher Yomikawa Aiho.

Though she was a not-so-glamorous-looking middle-aged woman wearing a green sports jacket... to Last Order, there was no need to look at any other parts when a woman had huge breasts and could be considered as having a nice body.

"'It's unreasonable...' says Misaka as Misaka is amazed that nutrition is unable to explain the difference."

"Oh, my, this is the result of everyone eating the same thing. Doesn't this give you the same possibility?"

"...!?!?"

"So there's no need for you to worry. You're already growing at a different rate from ordinary humans. Once time passes to make up for it, I'm sure that you'll grow up to have quite the lovely body."

Yoshikawa's words made Last Order reveal a look as if she was bathing under a healing light.

At this moment.

Thomp, something fell out from Yoshikawa's arms.

It was a strange-looking health product.

It was an item that used something similar to a belt to wrap around the body, but on the surface, it looked like something designed to change a part of the female's body forcefully.

In other words,

Seeing the flat-looking chest now, this thing looked rather suspicious.

"..."

Having seen the dirty side of an adult, Last Order showed a dejected look.

Then, she trembled as she opened her small mouth.

"'...You just said something about 'naturally' growing a lovely body just now, right?' asks Misaka as Misaka tries to confirm."

"Ho, hohoho. Actually, no, this is just something that my university friend asked me to check, since I'm a researcher. Seems like this thing's a fake product of science..."

"'I WON'T BE TRICKED BY THE LIES OF THIS KIND OF ADULT!!' EXCLAIMS MISAKA AS MISAKA TRIES TO REACH FOR THAT THING!!"

"No, you can't, Last Order!! That's a dangerous machine that'll blow up the chest if it's not a mature woman using it!!"

"'WHICH IS WHY MISAKA WILL NOT BE FOOLED BY THOSE WORDS!!' EXCLAIMS MISAKA AS MISAKA TRIES TO STOP YOU! IF YOU HAVE A MATURE WOMAN'S BODY, WON'T YOU NOT NEED SUCH A DEVICE!?"

Being left aside, Misaka Worst spoke to Accelerator, who was sleeping on the sofa,

"Biology researchers are unexpectedly attracted to those suspicious goods. Speaking of which, is it alright not to stop them from creating such a ruckus?"

"How irritating..."

His first concern was the irritating noise as he went to sleep again. Then, seemingly as a mediator, the huge-breasted master of the house, the teacher Yomikawa Aiho, stepped in between Yoshikawa Kikyou (who was joking about) and Last Order (who was arguing about being tricked).

"Alright, alright, cut it out. Isn't this something that Kikyou's complaining about not working? Speaking of which, there's also that slimming machine that 'can cause the body to change'. It's about time for me to step in and deal with those messed-up habits of yours-janyo."

After saying that, Yomikawa took away the breast enhancement device that both of them were fighting over.

"'THE ONE PERSON WHO DOESN'T NEED THIS TOOK AWAY THE LIGHT OF HOPE!!' EXCLAIMS MISAKA AS MISAKA SHUDDERS!"

"No, you can't, Aiho! If your breast level is enhanced with the machine, this world will collapse- WA!!"

But the situation developed in a way that they did not expect.

"...Eh? I didn't do anything, so why is smoke coming out without warning-janyo?"

"'Maybe the remaining breast power went in reverse,' says Misaka as Misaka trembles in front of this unknown phenomenon!!"

"Is this unscientific... suuu!?!? How is it possible!? But if it's Aiho, or that!!"

Yoshikawa was wavering in her belief of science due to this shocking scene.

As a side note, among the females, only Misaka Worst wasn't interested in the machine.

Accelerator continued to maintain his sleeping position and asked,

"You're not joining in?"

"I'll be interested if even you can get big breasts from it."

Part 5

The 10th district, in front of the cemetery in Academy City.

Just as Hamazura, Takitsubo, and Kinuhata having their rather blank-sounding conversation, the door to the "graveyard" opened. Hamazura and company turned to see Mugino walking towards them.

Her expression didn't change.

There was no sign of her crying, and her eyes didn't look red.

Even so, something had definitely happened inside.

And as for what had happened, she didn't want Hamazura and the rest to notice it.

"Is it over?"

Facing Hamazura's question, Mugino just gave an "Oh".

"It's over."

In reality, nothing may be over.

But Mugino added this sentence.

It was like she was trying to isolate it.

As a side note,

Though it was not suitable to reveal that they were remaining quiet, the land in District 10 was the cheapest in Academy City, and it was because this place was famous for having the worst security. The only graveyard was located there because many companies refused to set up shop there, and finally, after a long turnaround, it settled in this backdrop.

Thus,

Since he looked like he was bringing three youthful girls there (actually, it was the other way around), Hamazura Shiage-kun naturally became the bull's-eye for the delinquents gathered around.

"Which one would be faster: bus or train?"

Just as Hamazura was talking to them, five guys appeared in front of them, blocking them.

If this were a team of troopers, this group of delinquents would look like some hero fighter. The only guy facing them, Hamazura gave them a threatening look, probably to dampen their enthusiasm or gain the right to talk or something.

"Hooooollllld it right there, money kid. We're working right now, so can you please help us? Our work is just to beat people up badly and settle the debt, that's all."

"Whether you say anything or not as you hand your money to us, we'll beat you up good; whether you run or beg for mercy, we'll still beat you up. You understand the situation now?"

Damn it... This is a huge problem.

Though they were teenagers who were only treating death as something trivial, Hamazura himself wasn't some superhero, so his body trembled inadvertently. The second one was especially dangerous; from the way he looked and how he was squatting down, it seemed like he was a professional at this. To fight on the road, where there was no umpire or soft mat, he was even more dangerous right now to toss people, strangle the enemy's neck, or wring the joints than those stupid amateurs who would use blunt weapons or knives. Hamazura understood this from firsthand experience.

Even so.

On the other hand, Hamazura was rather relieved about this. Since they relied on fighting techniques, it was likely that this group of delinquents were like him in that they became delinquents because they had no ability. If they weren't dirty people who could manipulate gravity such that they would increase the effect to ten times that of a wrestler's throw, they couldn't be considered "the scariest kind in Academy City", right?

Besides, forget about Takitsubo; Mugino and Kinuhata, who were also with him, were of the scariest kind in Academy City.

Mugino was the 4th-ranked Level 5 esper, and Kinuhata was a Level 4 who could even handle a sniper war. The delinquents were basically fighting against a stationary tank or bomber jet. No matter whether the enemy was the number one foul freestyle wrestler, or a judo master who could toss man-eating bears aside, they wouldn't even be opponents for Mugino and Kinuhata.

Thus,

"...Oi, don't be like this."

Hamazura was honestly trying to advise the delinquents who were looking to cause trouble as he said this with agony.

Naturally, he ended up in End of the Century mode as he continued,

"Kids. I'm sincerely saying this for your own good, so remember everything that I say, or else I can't guarantee that you'll remain alive... In this world, there are certain realms that you can't interfere with. You're already one step away from that guy. One more step, and that distance will doom all of you. If you can identify that person, hurry up and scram!"

However,

For some reason, Mugino and Kinuhata exchanged weird looks with each other.

"My. How terrifying~ Save me, Hamazura."

The meaning behind these charming voices was unknown.

Then, Mugino and Kinuhata grabbed onto Hamazura's arms, seemingly about to clamp them for some unknown reason.

Knowing what they intended, Hamazura suddenly felt goosebumps.

However, the five delinquents and Takitsubo Rikou seemed to believe in this performance, not knowing whether it was true or not. The girl in the sports jacket also seemed to get competitive all of a sudden as she grabbed Hamazura's neck from behind, causing Hamazura to end up lifting her.

"...You can't take him without permission. Hamazura; you're mine."

At that moment,

Hamazura Shiage definitely heard some important brain circuits snap. They belonged to the five delinquents.

"Uh-oh."

After a while, a certain delinquent whose mouth was half-open in shock said,

"OOOHHHHHH!! WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO PULL HERE? WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO BY ACTING LIKE A PLAYBOY, YOU BASTARD!?"

The shout he let out was somewhat like a seal's or an otter's, but it was obvious that the enemy's anger had reached its peak. It seemed like he was really about to close in and personally beat Hamazura's face up.

At that moment, Mugino, who was deliberately holding Hamazura's wrist down through a delicate movement, twitched her body slightly. Because of the pain coming from his elbow, Hamazura had to follow Mugino's movements and turn around as if he was turning a door.

Thus, the delinquent's strike that was aimed at his head missed.

It ended up hitting his shoulder.

And the five fingers that he reached out just so happened to be in a grip state.

"YAAAAAHHHH, IT HURTS, DAMN IT!!"

"Kyah~ Hamazura's super~ cool~"

Mugino let out an even sillier-sounding voice as she grabbed Hamazura's wrist, which stopped midway through, and kicked him in the waist. Hamazura was sent flying into the middle of the group of delinquents. On the other side, Kinuhata beautifully "pressed" Takitsubo down just as she was sticking to Hamazura's back.

"W-what...?"

Before he could understand what was going on, it seemed like the delinquents realized something.

“IT’S TIME TO GET SERIOUS, EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?!?!?”

“YOU SHOULD SAY SOMETHING TO THAT DEMONIC WOMAN, EEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?!?!?”

Hamazura had only one choice.

Escape. He decided to scatter some soil from the flowerbed to obstruct the fallen delinquents’ view, and used that opportunity to get away.

Part 6

The smoking breast enhancement device was confiscated by Yomikawa, and Yoshikawa went back home to set the pre-recording time for the time being.

Right now, there was a live telecast on the TV inside the room, and Yomikawa noted that she wanted to record the drama that she wanted to watch. “It would be great if there’s a television receiver that could air multiple channels at the same time,” Yoshikawa muttered.

The TV was airing such a show.

Most likely, the host and the production crew couldn’t even smell the front lines.

“...Despite the fact that World War III ended in twelve days, after the war was over, there were a large number of eyewitness reports regarding supernatural phenomenon. Experts have called this a third war syndrome. This is a common group psychological problem that occurs due to the stress created by the warzone environment, similar to the phenomenon that occurred during the ‘Abnormal Halloween Night’s incident’ that took place during the political crisis in England. Some experts feel that they should be rewarded handsomely, and as soon as possible.”

And Accelerator was just lazing around.

He was just lying on the sofa, feeling that there was a sense of something being out of place.

On closer look, Last Order had snuck into such a small sofa.

“...What are you doing?”

“‘Misaka wants to sleep,’ says Misaka as Misaka explains clearly.”

“Oi.”

"...Sleep."

Before the strongest Level 5 in Academy City could complain, the ten-year-old-looking girl was already sleeping.

Just as Accelerator became flabbergasted, another voice came from somewhere else.

"How do you feel about taking back your peace?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing."

She used a tone that clearly implied something.

In the past, there was the existence of "darkness" in Academy City. It had tremendous power, but for certain reasons, the people involved in it would find it hard to reintegrate themselves into society. At times, in exchange for their own survival, they would use their friends as shields, offer things like books or information or even their status, or even be in charge of several "jobs"... it was that kind of world.

Accelerator had also been a part of it.

But this system had already been destroyed—not by anyone else, but by Accelerator at the end of World War III.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

Musujime Awaki.

Unabara Mitsuki... That was a fake name.

Accelerator's ears heard the voices of the commentators who enjoyed that boring peace.

"...Between this, it's unknown whether there really is a supernatural phenomenon, but basically, there's evidence of a huge golden ring and a bone-like thing left behind in cities all over the world- no, it's not so accurate to describe it as golden. The United Nations threw the piece into some parts of the Pacific Ocean that lack oxygen, and even though they did process it, used it to change the oxygen supply in the ocean, and also revived the supply of fish and other kinds of seafood, I do think that there are other motivations for them to throw them without investigating them..."

As for the other members of Group, who once worked as a group of four in the "darkness", how were they right now?

Accelerator wasn't really clear about this, but it was likely that in this bastardly city, they would work hard for their "stability".

However, there was something lacking.

He felt that something was lacking.

After the war, Accelerator had cut off all links to the “darkness”; thus, he wouldn’t be able to access the necessary information regarding the dark side of Academy City. Of course, there were means to “eavesdrop”; it was just that he didn’t want to get involved with the “darkness” ever again.

Thus, no matter whether it was a blessing or a curse, he wouldn’t be able to ensure the others’ safety.

Among the people who had taken part in that war, who could be excluded?

Most likely, “that guy” who had been in the deepest part came back safely, right?

“...Also, it’s worth being happy that Academy City’s side incurred zero casualties, but Academy City also exposed all technical expertise and military risks. Regarding this, Academy City has expressed...”

There was no need to look forward to this TV program that was uttering gibberish.

But if so, what could be trusted?

Part 7

There was once a cloning program that used the cells of the third-ranked Level 5 esper, Misaka Mikoto.

In terms of results, it was a failure. Unable to create the necessary specifications, it was ended. However, this cloning technique was used for another experiment, creating a mass number of clones.

The Sisters.

Last Order was the commander of the approximately 10,000 remaining Sisters, and Misaka Worst was created after that through the unorthodox Third Production Plan.

The massive brain that was formed by the electronic network of almost 10,000 brains formed this Misaka Network. The network linked all the information that the Sisters had, and the network also worked for a “certain purpose”.

There was Last Order, who was created as a “human interference commander”, and Misaka Worst, who had “evil thoughts and feelings” embedded in her for some “certain purpose”.

Thus...

“Go buy something?”

Accelerator, who was sleeping on the sofa, asked in shock, and the female teacher in the sports jacket, Yomikawa Aiho, nodded her head.

“I don’t care whether you came back from the battlefield or some other place; since you came back, you better start acting like a member of society and live on-jan.”

“So you’re talking about doing such a boring thing?”

“Oya?”

Yomikawa acted like she was confused and pondered for a while, before continuing.

“In human society, the most painful thing is being unable to help others and not being needed by others, right?”

“Cheh!”

Unable to say anything, Accelerator got up.

“You don’t have to come up with some twisted introduction to psychology, you damned teacher!”

“No way, I have no intention of going into life counseling. Basically, I’ll settle any problems that appear with this iron fist of mine.”

“So, what do I have to buy?”

“Food. Those that I circled in red on the list.”

“...That kind of thing again. Really reminds me of something that doesn’t match my death.”

“If so, work hard and get used to it.”

Being prompted by Yomikawa, Accelerator reluctantly grabbed his crutch and stood up.

Thus, Last Order, who had gotten sick of the spaceship game (she had woken up after the nap to challenge Misaka Worst again), looked up at Accelerator.

"'Misaka wants to go!! Misaka wants to go!!' exclaims Misaka as Misaka wants to be your assistant since you'll feel uncomfortable being alone!!"

"You're so noisy!! Wouldn't the future be completely different from me already!?"

Beside Last Order who was shouting "Misaka wants to go, Misaka wants to go", Misaka Worst seemed to be a little edgy for some reason.

Actually, to her, there was another battle other than the computer battle.

It was a real battle.

It was mentioned before that Misaka Worst had a strong sense of ill-intent thoughts and feelings added from a "certain aspect" of the Misaka Network.

This could be expressed not only through anger and hatred.

For example, jealousy.

She was envious of Yomikawa, who was always talking to Accelerator. She also wanted to go along.

Last Order's thoughts spread to all the Sisters. As there was an interference with the "certain aspect", it affected Misaka Worst as well.

Misaka Worst, who normally wouldn't take orders from the commander, Last Order, would inevitably be affected.

For this reason,

...UWAAH!? I want, I want to go shopping!! Damn it, Accelerator's none of my business, but the network, the network's giving an unbearable emotional wavelength, UUWWWWAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!

Nonononononononononononononononono--!!!

Misaka Worst tried her best to resist the surging force, but she was still unable to withstand it in the end.

As for why, though she tried to draw that evil intention out, she was still Misaka Worst (thus she couldn't handle it).

DANG! A short-circuited Misaka Worst stood up, and rushed at Last Order who was tugging at Accelerator's pants, knocking her away.

"Misaka, Misaka, too! Misaka wants to go out and shop!!!!"

Several minutes later.

After getting a wallet from Yomikawa, Accelerator asked a very simple question to Misaka Worst, who was lost in her own thoughts:

“What the hell were you doing just earlier?”

“...Misaka doesn’t understand it herself...”

Part 8

In order to get away from the delinquents, Hamazura was running randomly.

The method may vary depending on the target and the situation, but for running away on foot, the most important thing was to keep changing between roads and alleys. One had to make a decision when it was impossible to use a car or a bicycle.

More importantly, if it was an armed guard or some sort of security guard, one had to look for a place where there were few people. As for delinquents who ignored the law, it was a more practical to choose somewhere crowded.

The setting was also one of the reasons to use the surrounding people, view, and common knowledge to block the pursuers.

After considering this, it was important to avoid running away in a straight line. Even if it was the tiniest angle, by running around multiple times, it was easy to cause the pursuers to lose sight.

These methods were effective in shaking off pursuers, but there was one thing to note.

...Damn it! I’m unfamiliar with District 10!! Am I running north!?

There was a risk of getting lost if one ran and made turns on unfamiliar grounds.

Even if he wanted to run away, there was a chance that he ran a U-turn, and he could end up running back to his pursuers.

In order to prevent this, as a tactic, he would decide where to run, and then turn with minimal angle. It should be effective for him to continue running in the same direction.

Then, even though his mind was clear, under this situation where he was pursued by delinquents, if he could let his body obey his mind even when he was sprinting at full speed, it wouldn’t be so hard.

“Ha!! Ha!! ...Damn, damn it. Mugino and Kinuhata... I’ll make them remember it. Those girls, I’ll spank their butts 100 times after this. And if Takitsubo takes off her clothes, there’ll be a rather nice touch.”

As he was running at full speed, his thighs started to hurt, and his lungs weren’t at normal. Hamazura stopped and looked around.

He couldn’t find his pursuers now.

He saw the sign nearby; it was District 7.

It seemed like he had crossed districts.

For a moment, just for a moment, Hamazura thought of Mugino and the rest, but the worry quickly dissipated. The delinquents had all been chasing him, and even if they headed for Mugino and the rest, it was impossible for a Level 5 and Level 4 combination to fail.

Should I message them that I’m alright?

Hamazura pondered about this situation that was worth praising.

No, no, if they know that I’m alright, I’ll end up in some ridiculous thing again. Better act like I nearly died...

Dong!, Hamazura’s shoulder knocked into someone.

It was a middle-schooler-looking girl with tea-colored short hair.

“S-sorry.”

Hamazura consciously bent down and apologized, but the girl didn’t reply.

With an uneven pace, the girl vanished into the crowd.

...What was that? That’s a Tokiwadai Middle School uniform, right...?

Hamazura looked in the direction where the girl had vanished.

Seems like something major happened to her... well, it’s none of my business anyway.

Even if he were to continue to worry about her, he couldn’t help her anyway.

Originally intending to send a message, Hamazura slipped his cell phone back into his pocket. Just as he was looking around and thinking about getting a cold drink to quench his thirst,

“Oi, Hamazura. What’s with you?”

A voice came from beside him.

Adjusting his breathing, Hamazura looked over. It was a face he was very familiar with.

“...Hanzou?”

Between the Lines 1

The name of the entire group was Skill-Out.

It was a group of teenagers gathered together after they were eliminated from the “esper development” program that formed the basis of Academy City’s school curriculum.

Truthfully, the name Skill-Out was like a “mafia” or a “motorcycle gang”; they weren’t really an organization, but rather a collective term. These groups would go against each other, and they would also work with each other; it was a complicated group. But to the outside world that didn’t know of the truth, they were just “guys who were useless at school and who caused lots of trouble”.

In truth, that was a wrong impression.

No matter where they had been born, no matter what they did, they were all moral activists who would fight society. Of course, they would do unspeakable things like being a home for others.

Among all the Skill-Out gangs, the ways to decide a leader, leadership capacity, and management means differed.

Once, in a certain group, there was a boy known to the world.

His name was Komaba Ritoku.

A boy who died as of this October.

CHAPTER 2

What Lies Ahead, What Should Be Chosen.

Dream.

Part 1

Hamazura and Hanzou entered a set meal restaurant where everything was worthy of complaint other than the price. They settled down at a table in one corner of the restaurant and Hanzou ordered a bunch of food that was seasoned so that it felt like it needed some beer with it to be complete.

When Hamazura had been in Skill-Out, he, Komaba, and Hanzou had gone to that restaurant together frequently.

A flat-screen TV was set up in a corner of the restaurant.

Hamazura idly watched a talk show that was going on about a reorganization of the Roman Catholic Church that included the top position of pope changing from Matthai Reese to Pietro Yogdis. Hanzou then started speaking.

“Aren’t you going to order something, Hamazura?”

“I actually just ate at a family restaurant,” responded Hamazura and only ordered a few skewers of salted yakitori. “...You always order Japanese food, don’t you? And you don’t seem to care what kind of restaurant you’re in either.”

“Do I really?”

“You’re the kind of guy that would order fish at a yakiniku restaurant.”

After the food arrived, Hanzou focused on eating for a bit. It seemed he hadn’t had any lunch yet. Hamazura disassembled the skewered chicken and ate the pieces one by one after carefully removing the skin.

As Hanzou continued to chow down on his food, Hamazura looked at him questioningly.

“What’s with you? Did you not have any breakfast?”

“Oh, I’ve just been busy lately, so I haven’t been able to eat a proper meal in a while. I just don’t have the time, so I’ve been eating things like jelly and beef jerky. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to sit down and eat.”

“?”

“Hey, I haven’t been able to get a hold of you recently, Hamazura. Where have you been?”

“I’m the End of the Century Emperor back from the battlefield.”

“Ahn?”

Now it was Hanzou’s turn to look puzzled.

Following that, Hamazura and Hanzou started exchanging information that could have been thing’s they had actually seen and could have been mere rumors.

One was about the customer that got so pissed at the stingy settings of a pachinko parlor’s slot machines that he plowed into the parlor with a dump truck. Another was about the strengthening of security on ATM’s that made even going around and destroying vending machines a better means of gaining money.

“Hehh. So you’ve got a girl, Hamazura.”

“Well, yeah. ...But to be honest, I’m a little uneasy about it,” said Hamazura as he stabbed the removed chicken skins with a skewer. “Y’see, with the way I’ve always done things, I can attack, but I can’t protect. I don’t want this to be a relationship that ends in a few months. And so I finally have to think about things long term when I act.”

“Money problems?”

“...I was thinking of maybe using my lock picking skills. Not to steal stuff from cars, but to have a road service where I open people’s doors for them when they lock their keys in the car or whatever. If I can strengthen my stealing skills in that direction, I can use them to protect, too.”

“Nee ha ha,” laughed Hamazura in embarrassment.

He pulled out a small reference book that looked like it was for a correspondence course from his pocket and put it on the table.

“I don’t think that getting my skills up to a practical level will be easy. I tried reading a magazine that talked about security, but I had no clue what the stuff about electronic locks was about.”

“...Well, at least you know what area you’re interested in, right? Like with choosing between the fine arts and the sciences, you have to choose what you’re good at. At the very least, there’s no way it could end up being wasted effort. All the work you put in will add up.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Hey, you’re the guy who had the heavy machinery we needed to steal an ATM up and running in 2 minutes. I’d say going down the path of locks is a good decision.”

That was when a cell phone started ringing.

Hanzou pulled his cell phone from his pocket, looked at the screen, and then put it away.

He grabbed the bill and stood up.

Hamazura looked puzzled.

“What is it?”

“A money making opportunity,” Hanzou said with a bitter smile. “But this is what you were calling an ‘attack’. You can’t protect anyone with this. There’s nothing in it for you now.”

“I see.”

“Well, I have to hurry. See you, Hamazura.”

“Hey, I’ll pay for mine.”

“Didn’t I just tell you this is a money making opportunity for me? The food’s on me.”

Finished speaking, Hanzou turned his back to Hamazura and headed for the register.

Hamazura felt a little left out by not being invited along, but then...

“...Oh? The cashier isn’t here. I can make a dash for it!!”

“You bastaaaaarrrrddd!! Don’t dine and dash leaving me behiiiiiiind!!”

He then drowned his faint feelings in Worcestershire sauce.

Part 2

They went to buy the groceries for dinner at a nearby supermarket.

"..."

"..."

Accelerator and Misaka Worst stood listening to the outdated pop music that made one wonder, "Why the hell did they choose this?"

They felt as out of place as someone who went to a baseball game and accidentally ended up sitting in the seats by the third-base where the opposing team's cheering squad sat.

"Is this an attempt to line you and Misaka up next to normal people in order to find out just how twisted we are?" asked Misaka Worst as she pushed the rattling shopping cart with one hand.

Accelerator responded sounding even more displeased than her.

"...They're trying to get us used to peaceful scenes."

It may have sounded like a ridiculous idea, but there was actually nothing more important for people who had returned from the battlefield. If they weren't able to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling there and weren't able to adapt to the empty peaceful days, they would end up distancing themselves from the peace they had returned to and would only be able to live in constant battle.

Up until then, Accelerator and Misaka Worst had been at the center of evil created by various people.

They had been covered in filth crawling around in a world where blood being shed was the norm and outsmarting the established rules in order to live on was necessary.

They had gained a type of strength from those experiences, but they also held the risk of distancing themselves from peace.

Monsters.

Targets of fear.

Those who were found worthless if they could not kill someone.

If they didn't want to become those things, they had to take in that out-of-place atmosphere. They had to get to the point where that kind of place was the norm.

But...

“Hey, hey, Mr. Honor Student.”

“Shut it.”

“That sales advertisement doesn’t matter. It’s free if you steal it all.”

“...Do you *want* me to punch you?”

“Why? Anyway. They’re careful to make sure people don’t take anything from the store at sweets shops, but doesn’t it seem like they haven’t thought of the idea of eating it all in the store and sticking the empty wrappers between the shelves?”

“You really are rotten to the core, aren’t you?”

“Actually, Misaka can’t believe that people actually go through the process of paying the amount on the price tag to get things. Isn’t getting everything as cheaply and easily as possible the foundation of business?”

“It isn’t business if you aren’t paying for it.”

“Oh! How about we eat some samples and then pretend to get food poisoning?”

“If you do that, I’ll fucking eat you alive.”

As he complained, a quizzical expression came to Accelerator’s face.

(...How the hell did *I* become the one with more common sense?)

This did seem very out of place for him, but, at the same time, it wasn’t really.

It was true that informing someone else what common sense dictated was out of place for him.

However, he decided that being immune to common sense was hardly something to brag about.

Part 3

After leaving the set meal restaurant in District 7, Hamazura felt the cell phone in his pocket vibrating.

He pulled it out and looked at the screen which displayed “Takitsubo Rikou”.

However, when he pressed the connect button and put it to his ear, it was not her voice he heard.

“Hamazuraaa! You’re super slow for someone’s who’s just supposed to be doing odd jobs! Where did you super run off to!?”

“Ugh, who cares; I was thinking of killing some time by kicking those idiots’ asses, but all those delinquents ran off after you. And since you are taking forever, it’ll be night before you get back at this rate, We’ll go find you instead.” added Mugino.

“I-I see. Well, I’m—”

“No, no,” Mugino interrupted him for some reason. “I’m bored, so I was thinking of making the Hamazura Search into a game.”

“?”

“It’ll be a punishment game where Kinuhata, Takitsubo, and I will search for you and whoever finds you first gets to punish the last one to find you. Let’s see, the punishment will be...”

“It’ll just be making the loser wear a super bunny suit, right?”

“What!!!???” Hamazura reacted.

“Hamazura, you’ve been super gloomy lately and it’s making me wonder why Takitsubo-san would stick with you.”

“...Don’t worry. Hamazura’s good points lie elsewhere...”

(Huh!? She ignored the bunny part!?)

Hamazura started trembling as he sensed a rising danger, but he didn’t ask for details then. He swore in his heart he would talk with her alone about it later.

“Okay, the super Hamazura Search competition is about to start. Ready, go!”

With a click the line was severed.

Hamazura stared down at his cell phone’s small LCD screen.

He may not be able to go down the same path as Hanzou. He may not be able to return to Skill-Out.

Even though he had overcome World War III, Hamazura was still an underling who could do nothing but run when regular, everyday delinquents came after him.

Except he still had connections to other people.

With Mugino, with Kinuhata, and with Takitsubo.

Frenda may be gone, but Hamazura and the others had regained the connections that came with Item.

There were people who would come searching for him if he was missing.

That wasn't very extravagant, but it helped to support the depths of Hamazura's heart.

He had realized all that once again.

(...I can't just continue to run away.)

Battles in that peaceful world would not be decided with the result of a fist fight. And he couldn't forcibly take victory from someone else. Instead, he had to become someone who could protect those who were important to him. That would solve everything.

As Hamazura was seriously thinking about all that, he had another thought.

(...Huh? Takitsubo and the others said they were searching for me, but what am I supposed to do?)

Could he move around doing whatever he wanted or should he stay where he was?

The game had started without any detailed rules being explained. As such, Hamazura couldn't go on, couldn't go back, and was stuck timidly where he was as if he was an idiotic piece of art.

"Oh?"

A voice called out to the timid objet d'art titled "Hamazura".

It was a girl's voice.

He turned around and saw...a difficult to describe girl. She was wearing an oddly short mini-yukata (?), had brown hair, wore thick makeup, and had accessories all over. She felt like the result of asking an old man who had never seen a city high school girl to describe one.

He knew her.

He didn't know her family name, but her given name was Kuruwa. The chain wrapped around her shoulders, torso, and legs rattled as she approached him.

“Oh, Hamazura-shi. What are you doing here?”

“I’m the End of the Century Emperor Landmark.”

“?”

He was a hidden goal point, but he gave a light smile instead of explaining further.

“What are you doing, Kuruwa-chan? Looking for Hanzou again?”

As far as Hamazura knew, Kuruwa had an unfortunate obsession with everything ninja and he thought she had been chasing after Hanzou in various ways.

Whether it had anything to do with that or not, she seemed to have had some kind of inner change as she was speaking much more politely than before.

“No, no. Hanzou-sama seems to be rather busy right now, so I’m doing something else.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If I were seriously chasing after Hanzou-sama, I might use my seductive techniques to get all the information you have, Hamazura-shi.”

“Seductive...techniques....?”

That may have been something he would normally love to hear, but his breath caught because he had been caught off guard by one of those very techniques once.

(Hearing Kuruwa say that is a dangerous sign,) thought Hamazura as he put himself on guard.

Kuruwa must not have liked the look on his face, because she looked a tad offended and moved her hand to her kimono’s obi.

“You look like you don’t believe me. Perhaps I should show one to you now.”

“W-wait!! Don’t strip!! Keep your clothes on!! Using seductive techniques with no goal is nothing more than an endless erotic hell!!”

Kuruwa must have sensed something from Hamazura as he trembled in fear, because she removed her hand from her obi.

“I want to be with Hanzou-sama very much, but I don’t want to get in his way.”

“Oh, yeah. He did say he was doing something. He seemed really busy and even said he didn’t even have time to eat.”

“Hanzou-sama did?”

“I saw him just a bit ago at that set meal restaurant. As usual, he was ordering nothing but cheap Japanese food.”

“Well, he is the kind of person that would order normal fried vegetables at a Chinese restaurant.”

“Or fish at a yakiniku restaurant.”

The two laughed at their shared view of Hanzou and gained a tiny bit of a kindred spirit from it.

“So did you hear about what was going on from Hanzou-sama?”

“A little. He said it was a money making opportunity.”

“Hmm. That doesn’t sound like what I’m working on.”

“What are you working on, Kuruwa-chan?”

“Oh, it’s just a matter Hanzou-sama got involved in that I’m sticking my nose into. But would he really start working on something else while still involved in that?”

“?”

“Well, you’ve already heard about it, so I can talk about it with you.”

“About what?”

“Oh, you know. The thing about...”

Part 4

Accelerator and Misaka Worst put items in the shopping cart according to the marked items on the advertisement flyer.

“Furikake, nori tsukudani, whitebait, mentaiko, and umeboshi...”

“Misaka may not be the best person to say this because she’s only ever had synthetic foods, but isn’t this too many things to put on rice?”

“She’s just trying to cut corners. This is definitely better than nothing but frozen foods.”

“Misaka would call even frozen foods a luxury.”

After that, Misaka Worst’s frivolous speech came to a stop.

Accelerator had stopped moving with an item not marked on the flyer in his hand. The cap on the top of a bottle of furikake had a bonus doll of what must have been the mascot.

If that had been Accelerator’s tastes, bursting out laughing would have been the only appropriate response, but the god of laughter wasn’t smiling on Misaka Worst that much.

However, that didn’t stop her from getting a sneer on her face.

“A little chick mascot sure is clichéd... Sir, is that a present for Last Order?”

“That brat’s tastes are really damn straight-forward,” spat out Accelerator as he lightly shook the furikake bottle. “...As part of the Misaka Network, you’re under the influence of its one large will, right? So your tastes must be pretty much the same, right?”

“Y’know, Misaka may receive some interference from the Network, but it’s specialized so it’s only the evil intentions and dark portions of the network. Misaka would rather you did not treat her like that naïve little girl.”

“...”

“Misaka’s settings are more to trample that underfoot in order to more effectively damage you. Misaka would think you had painfully figured that out on the snow plains of Russia. Misaka simply has no interest in such a worthless masco—”

Accelerator silently swung the furikake bottle to the side and Misaka Worst’s gaze followed it.

He swung it back the other way and the ao dai-wearing girl’s gaze moved back in that direction.

“You haven’t taken your eyes off this chick mascot this entire time.”

“Kh!!” Misaka Worst seemed oddly dismayed. “...M-Misaka can’t believe you would want to look at her the same as Last Order in order to play with the imbalance between body and mind...”

“According to the numbering, you’re actually the little sister.”

Part 5

Accelerator and Misaka Worst finished shopping and left the supermarket.

They had one item that was not marked on the flyer: the furikake.

“Ahh, Misaka encountered something unknown that she did not imagine would happen. Peaceful days are much more tiring than Misaka predicted.”

“…”

Accelerator couldn’t just laugh off Misaka Worst’s words.

Was this really okay?

A simple shopping trip had worn him out this much, so could he really get along with this world?

It was easy to write off this lukewarm peacefulness as something that just wasn’t for him. He had once subconsciously glorified that method of dealing with it as making him really cool.

But what was he supposed to do after that?

If he turned his back on it, was there something that shined even brighter waiting for him elsewhere?

If he wanted to become a monster that had no value beyond killing, he should just continue on down that path. But that was not where Accelerator wanted to end up. The more he wrote off peace as not for him, the farther he became from what he wished for.

Could he really do it?

(...What is he doing?)

A certain Level 0 boy came to his mind.

That boy had most likely been fighting in an even deeper part of the world than Accelerator who held the title of Academy City’s strongest. And of course, that boy had his own place. Had he returned to that place? Did he feel out of place?

If he was constantly switching between the farthest limits of the battlefield and calm, peaceful days, he would be much more amazing than Accelerator who continued to be stuck in the darkness.

For a bit, Accelerator surrendered his body to the fatigue, but then Misaka Worst began tugging on his sleeve.

He looked up with a puzzled expression.

“What?”

“Let’s go buy some sweets and then eat them right away. Misaka has heard that that is the foundation of being bad.”

“...You certainly get negative aspects from a lot of different places, don’t you?”

Well, she gathered up the negative aspects of the entire Misaka Network, so Last Order’s desires would be in there too.

And so, mostly at the insistence of Misaka Worst, the two of them bought ice cream at a stand made from a van.

“Should Misaka use her tongue seductively as she licks it?”

“Who are you trying to please by doing that? Yourself?”

“Well, there is that. If it would be devastating to your relationship with Last Order, Misaka will let you touch her tits and ass, but doing it now would seem rather pointless.”

“Say what you like, I’m not fucking listening,” responded Accelerator fed up with how she was acting.

Ice cream in hand, he casually looked over at the crowd of people and suddenly froze.

He saw a silver-haired nun wearing a white nun’s habit.

Fatigue and impatience could be seen in her face and it looked as if vitality had been scraped from her well-featured face.

(Her...?)

Accelerator recognized that face.

However, her atmosphere was quite different from when he had met her before.

A few seconds later, she had disappeared into the crowd.

(Lost sight of her. Well, I have no reason to frantically go searching for her. And getting her involved with me could even send her life in a much worse direction.)

The girl with an unfriendly look in her eyes sitting next to the #1 didn’t seem to notice.

“Misaka just can’t get used to it.” Misaka Worst’s candid feelings slipped out as she licked the surface of the vanilla ice cream. “Misaka can’t get used to the two of us walking home in the sunlight licking ice cream. It just isn’t right; it isn’t normal. Don’t you feel uneasy because nothing is happening? It just feels like the harbinger of some huge event.”

“Do you want something to happen?”

“Who knows. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Misaka doesn’t think anyone accurately knows their own mind. Even when a psychologist does his own test, he gives a softer estimate on himself. If there was someone who could fully and perfectly understand their own mind, that person would be crazy in their own way.”

Misaka Worst smiled.

“How about you?”

“I don’t care,” responded Accelerator halfheartedly. “I took back everything I needed from that war. I now have everything I need. And if it’s needed to keep those things, I’m willing to do things I’m not used to.”

“Misaka thinks that finding out what exactly it is we can’t seem to get used to is at the center of it all.”

“Ahn?”

“Is it the peaceful atmosphere itself or is it being stuck inside boundaries laid out by someone else.”

“...What are you? Some little brat?”

“Misaka feels this isn’t something to laugh at. Misaka thinks that we should experience just how inadequate it is to be trapped in boundaries laid out by some else. Then we should tear away everything that isn’t necessary. Aren’t our personalities at odds with the mere idea of being trapped within boundaries laid out by someone else?”

“Just change the way you think.” There was no turmoil in Accelerator’s feelings. “Someone is thinking that we can’t do that. Someone is thinking that beasts like us can only live within a sea of blood. In that case, isn’t successfully living inside the boundaries laid out by them a way of showing our defiance to them?”

“Ah-ha. Misaka likes that.” Misaka Worst continued licking away her vanilla ice cream and chomped at the unneeded portions of the cone. “But don’t you smell something bad around here?”

“?”

“Misaka would even say it’s a nostalgic smell.”

“...”

Hearing her words, Accelerator narrowed his eyes.

Holding his cane, he looked around the area again.

A tranquil and casual cityscape stretched out around him.

For that reason, something seemed out of place. Its color and form perfectly blended in, but it was still clearly different. It was an unexplainable intuitive differentiation like seeing an alien wearing human skin.

At the other end of his gaze was...

“That tourist bus.”

“Yes, it could be a disguised undercover vehicle,” said Misaka Worst smiling. “Academy City is the same as ever. Oh? But this is odd. Misaka thought a certain someone had gotten rid of the city’s dark organizations by having them do away with the dirty jobs they forced people to do by using people and objects as shields.”

“...”

“We have two paths we can take here.” Misaka Worst presented her fluttering index and middle fingers in front of Accelerator. “To eliminate them accepting the danger that brings in order to ensure our safety or to safely overlook them here in order to avoid danger.”

“The answer is obvious,” spat Accelerator in response. “We take them out here. They broke their end of the agreement. I need to give them a warning about that darkness that’s still hanging around. I don’t like sticking my nose in other people’s business, but it’s a completely different story when it involves the dark side of the city.”

Misaka Worst whistled.

“Well, now that the darkness has begun moving, a certain someone would surely get hurt and her life would be in danger. It seems #1 is a good little boy who just wants to help out others.”

“...Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about. So what are you going to do?”

“Misaka will of course choose the more dangerous route. It sounds more fun.”

Part 6

Hamazura Shiage pressed his back up against the wall.

He slid down and sat on the ground.

Kuruwa was gone.

The conversation he had with her replayed in the back of his mind.

“Oh, you know. The thing about Hanzou-sama sheltering a small girl.”

The truth was, Hamazura Shiage was not in a position where he could brazenly enjoy his life in Academy City.

When he had left the city and gotten caught up in World War III, he had been on the run because it had been determined that he was “an uncertain element that knew too much about the dark side of Academy City”.

During the war, Hamazura had gotten ahold of a certain piece of data.

It was known as the Parameter List and was enough to shake Academy City at its core.

But it wasn’t perfect.

He had managed to balance the scales, but if the scales tipped past a certain point, the very depths of Academy City would be sure to put together a means of eliminating him.

“I don’t know the details, but it seems that girl is being targeted by the upper levels of Academy City. It’s as if she would be killed if she walked around the area for half an hour.”

At best, the scales were exceedingly unstable.

If they received another large shock, they could be moved in one direction or the other

To prevent that, it was best to lie low.

He needed to take time to see whether the scales were tipped far enough in his favor to risk his life on it.

Basically, he had to not cause any problems.

He should abandon Hanzou and abandon the girl who was being targeted.

“Ah, I can’t quite remember her name.”

Most likely, that reasoning wasn't wrong.

If he was to ensure his safety, that was the only option left.

He had sworn to protect Takitsubo Rikou.

He wanted to keep danger from her as much as possible. He wanted to avoid having her swallowed up by the city's darkness at all costs.

So the decision to abandon them wasn't wrong.

It wasn't wrong.

But...

"I think it was...Fre...Fre...mea? ...Yes, it was Fremea Seivelun. She's about 10 years old and has fluffy blonde hair. She was emotionally attached to Komaba-shi, wasn't she?"

Crouching in the alley, Hamazura gritted his teeth.

Komaba Ritoku was the Skill-Out leader who had once fought the city's darkness for the sake of a great number of Level 0s and died for it.

Fremea had been the girl Komaba had fought until the very, very end to protect. Hanzou was most likely sheltering her to carry out Komaba's dying wish.

Fremea was a harmless Level 0 with no connection to Skill-Out.

That harmlessness may have been one of the reasons Komaba had tried to protect her.

Also, Hamazura Shiage knew the family name Seivelun.

Up until then, he hadn't known the family name of the girl emotionally attached to Komaba. Even Komaba, the person closest to her, had merely called her "imported" because that had been his first impression upon hearing the name.

However, Hamazura couldn't fool himself any longer.

Now that he knew this, he had to face this.

"...Frenda Seivelun," muttered Hamazura.

There was a short pause before he continued speaking.

"So she was her little sister...!!"

Frenda had been one of the main members of Item who had fought alongside Mugino Shizuri, Kinuhata Saiai, and Takitsubo Rikou.

He did not know the details of how she had come into contact with the city's dark side and become part of Item.

It was possible Frenda herself had enjoyed fighting.

But...

It was possible it had all started with Fremea.

Was there really nothing wrong with abandoning her?

His friend Hanzou was currently fighting with the city's dark side.

Allowing Fremea to die would be the same as trampling on the feelings of Komaba Ritoku and Frenda.

With all that, was there really nothing wrong with abandoning them?

(...That's right.)

"There isn't anything wrong with it," Hamazura muttered.

He had given voice to his thoughts in order to solidify his view.

His voice gradually grew louder.

"There's nothing wrong with it. There's no way there's anything wrong with keeping danger away from Takitsubo and the rest of Item!! I overcame all that war. I may have been covered in filth, but I finally grabbed this new life with my own two hands!! Like hell I could let that slip away. I will protect what I've obtained on my own no matter what!!"

Still crouched in the alley, Hamazura grabbed his head with his hands.

That's right.

When he thought about it rationally, the most effective way of protecting himself, Takitsubo, and the others was to abandon Hanzou and Fremea here.

That option held the least risk and allowed him to protect those he cared about the easiest.

That was what he should choose if he truly wanted to protect those he cared about.

When he let the callousness sink in, he knew he should just let the problem approaching before his eyes go on by him.

He would choose.

He had to choose.

Now.

Hamazura clicked his tongue and clawed at his head.

“Fuck!! Like hell I can abandon them!!”

He put his hand to the wall and stood up once more.

He ran towards the shadows in the depths of the narrow alleyway that symbolized the city’s dark side.

He ran to save his friend who was facing a deadly crisis.

He ran to protect the feelings of the dead.

He didn’t contact Takitsubo and the others.

This was Hamazura’s problem.

As long as the balance of the scales was unstable, he couldn’t get those girls wrapped up in this.

He ran in order to ensure that he would return.

Hamazura Shiage dared to run into the depths of the darkness.

Between the Lines 2

Komaba Ritoku.

Many people trembled in fear when they first met that large, muscular boy, but he personally did not like any kind of conflict.

When he had become the leader of Skill-Out, a gathering of Level 0s who had dropped out of the schools’ psychic power development programs, he had tried to drive some morals into the group little by little.

He had them avoid unnecessary violence, not specifically target the weak, and no longer merely commit crimes that Anti-Skill and Judgment would overlook. He instead wanted them to secretly protect those who couldn't even ask for help.

Of course, the actuality did not turn out so lovely and tear-jerking. As always, they had used the fact that they had been ostracized by Academy City to justify doing all sorts of horrible things. They would say they just wanted a place to belong and do all sorts of completely unrelated things.

However, it was true that Komaba had caused a certain "line" to bud.

To those who had been victims of Skill-Out, it may have sounded like nothing more than an excuse, but it was true that something like morality had been born there.

It provided an opportunity.

Something happened that influenced their fate.

Perhaps it was like placing a large snowball at the top of a hill and having someone give it a push.

This was nothing as calm as a slow change or a natural growth.

What it actually was had been horribly simple.

One after another, Level 0s were being attacked by powerful espers.

CHAPTER 3

A Slight Margin and an Omen That Connects to the Next.

Girl.

Part 1

"This way."

Hanzou beckoned and a girl of around 10 followed him.

They were headed for the entrance to an underground mall.

The difference between the delinquent boy and the doll-like girl was at the level of ordering coffee with sushi.

The girl, Fremea Seivelun, was dressed very peculiarly. Her clothes were mainly white and pink and they were very fluffy and full of frills and lace. Her lower half was very plain in comparison with only a miniskirt and thick, wine red tights. She looked like an idol, but not a real performer; she looked more like the kind of idol one would see in a video game.

She gave the impression that those clothes were what were forced upon her by those around her based on her appearance and not what she wanted to wear herself.

In other words, she had the features to match those clothes.

Her slender arms and legs, her fluffy blonde hair, her white skin, and her transparent blue eyes all added to the impression that she looked like a doll. Simply put, it felt like anything she wore would then become a popular thing to wear.

In peaceful times, these features would clearly have been positive traits.

But that was not so at that time.

When on the run, traits good or bad that made one stand out worked to one's disadvantage.

Hanzou understood this.

Even for someone in the delinquent group of Skill-Out, he was especially skilled at blending in with others.

The reason he was taking someone who stood out as much as Fremea to the underground mall was clear.

It was because Fremea's pursuers had found out where she was.

Originally, Hanzou had plenty of hideouts. You could even say that was his hobby. He would prepare hideouts in his spare time. From cardboard box houses to high-class apartments, he would prepare places to spend the night all over the city, he would search for internet cafes that were usually empty that he could use to gather information, he would hide cheap bikes and cars around, and he would prepare many different identities. The more he had of those things, the better. Having too few could be a problem, but having too many couldn't. At least, that was what he had thought...

(I fucked up.)

That was Hanzou's frank conclusion.

(They picked up on my periodic maintenance of the hideouts and tailed me from there. Dammit. That completely defeats the purpose of everything I had stored up!!)

Whether it was a high-class apartment or a cardboard box house, it would fall into disrepair if he left it alone for long periods of time. To keep that from happening, he would periodically visit them, but the pursuers had spotted him while he was doing so.

He didn't know how much these pursuers had researched him, but it was best to think that he could no longer use any of his many hideouts.

As such, Hanzou and Fremea were not running for the underground mall in order to reach another hideout.

In fact, Hanzou had no clear destination in mind.

Hanzou had a cell phone in his hand, but he had altered the inner components quite a bit so that it could now also pick up electromagnetic waves other than the ones intended for phones.

For example, he could pick up the radio signals from Anti-Skill, the teachers who were trained to and went on patrol to protect the peace of the city.

(They're checking down below so they can transport a major criminal. If we go in here, those people from the darkness behind us will have to fall back!!)

Hanzou may have been too naïve in his thinking. If their pursuers had been delinquents, that method would have been enough to get rid of them.

And if he could cut off their route they were taking, their chances of losing them would have been fairly high.

However...

The underground mall's roof suddenly collapsed and their pursuer promptly came down through it.

They weren't up against someone who paid Anti-Skill any heed.

A large cloud of dust flew into the air. The pursuer that had fallen down about 300 meters from Hanzou did not have a human form.

(What is that...?)

The silhouette he could see through the dust looked like the top section of a large insect with the upper half of a human attached to the top. And it was huge. Its height alone brought it almost all the way up to the underground mall's ceiling.

Its smooth movements brought the image of a living creature to Hanzou's mind, but he realized what it was shortly thereafter.

It was a powered suit.

It had 8 legs and no head. The lenses and sensors were put directly on the body. It looked like the waist portion could rotate 360 degrees. Hanzou had no idea how it was operated or how the movements of a human's limbs were linked to its movements, but, since the suit was over 5 meters tall, the pilot was most likely in a space in the torso portion.

However, the suit's most characteristic portion was its arms.

Its left and right arms were different sizes. The left arm was about twice the size of a human arm while the right arm was more than 4 times as large. Also, both of the arms were cylindrical below the elbow. Near the ends, separate wrists were attached like bayonets.

The left arm held a machine gun.

The right arm held...

"A smoothbore gun!?"

That was a type of gun used for the main guns of tanks.

As Hanzou yelled, a flash burst from the barrel.

He didn't even have time to push Fremea out of the way.

The shell hit the wall a slight distance away from them and a shock wave exploded out. A split second later, the sound struck Hanzou's ears. He had thought the shock wave had destroyed his sense of hearing, but an even greater noise attacked him even further.

However, he didn't have time to complain about every little bit of pain.

His body was blown a few meters through the air before he finally hit the ground.

He then truly lost consciousness.

And 3 seconds later, he had regained consciousness.

The reason for this was clear.

(...Looks like the Shield AED that automatically applies an electric shock to my chest in response to the level of my brain waves actually helped me.)

"Gah...gfh....!! F-Fr-Fremea...!!"

Hanzou couldn't get up due to a concussion and he looked around the area with dim eyes. A large number of students were running screaming for the exits. Their high-pitched voices and thundering footsteps sent pain pounding into Hanzou's head.

Anti-Skill seemed completely dumbfounded for a few seconds, but they soon began moving. They fired their handguns at the 8-legged powered suit, but, once they realized their bullets were merely ricocheting off of the armor, they changed their tactic. They worked to keep the casualties as low as possible by quickly evacuating the students.

It was admirable that they were doing more than just getting taken out, but it was still too much to expect them to protect Hanzou and Fremea. The Anti-Skill group there could do nothing more than urge the people to evacuate, so they would be easily defeated if the 8-legged suit seriously attacked them.

(Where's Fremea! Shit!!)

Crawling around on the ground, Hanzou continued to search for the girl.

The wall had been greatly destroyed and the shockwave had shattered the surrounding pillars and glass. He saw a small form lying amid the rubble.

It was her.

She was 10 meters away.

He couldn't tell if she was okay from where he was, but she at least seemed to be in one piece. They were in a much better situation than they could have been because the smoothbore gun had miraculously been unable to aim properly.

The sound of a few more blasts pounded Hanzou's ears.

The 8-legged suit was firing to hold Anti-Skill in check.

With each shot, the no longer needed bottom disk of the shell was expelled and the smaller left arm would load a new shell. It seemed to be taking the shells from a backpack-like area on its back.

It wasn't directly aiming for Anti-Skill; it was dropping the shells on the floor in front of them. Perhaps this was because the pilot had a conscience and only wanted to attack those he was after or perhaps targeting humans with anti-armor weapons was a pain, so he was just attacking with a shower of fragments.

Anti-Skill's protective vests and other protectors guarded against the shower of fragments, but they didn't do anything about the shock waves. The supposedly strong Anti-Skill members lost consciousness one by one almost as if they had been hit by a stun gun after pouring a bucket of salt water over their heads.

The right arm of the 8-legged powered suit expelled a metal disk from its elbow area along with some cinders. It was the bottom portion of the shell that was not needed now that the shell had been fired.

"Uuh..."

Fremea, who had been taken out by a shock wave, let out a groan in response to the loud noise. She had regained consciousness...or, more accurately, she had been forcefully shaken awake.

Strength finally returned to Hanzou's arms and legs.

(Before hitting the target, the parts hit the walls or ceiling... Are the shells it's using APFS...or whatever it's called. The one that's a bunch of letters from the alphabet. The type that uses a large amount of pressure to pierce armor instead of explosive powder. And this has a multilayer structure. After it pierces the armor, it sends shards and a shockwave inside.)

It was a shell that was not intended to be directly used on people. It was meant to be fired at a tank or other armored vehicle and kill the people inside. The destructive force of the shards and the shockwave was greatest in a sturdy closed box. That may have been why Hanzou and Fremea hadn't been killed.

"...Fremea. Can you stand, Fremea!?"

"..."

The girl moved slightly but didn't give a proper response. Hanzou ran over to her staying low to the ground.

The powered suit responded.

It used its 8 legs to approach and mercilessly turned the gun on its right arm towards them.

Hanzou approached Fremea by sliding across the floor covered in fragments of building materials, grabbed her in his arms, and disappeared around a corner of a passageway.

The blast came.

The mass of death flew towards Hanzou faster than sound and it struck the wall between him and the powered suit.

But it did not end there.

The shock wave from the shell hitting one side of the wall passed right through the wall and scattered out in a radial pattern on the other side of the wall. The building itself shook like a giant speaker.

A tremendous blast reached Hanzou and Fremea's ears.

"Bhhh! Ghoh!?"

They were knocked to the ground. The wall was unable to bear the vibration and small fragments a few millimeters across broke off and pierced Hanzou's skin. He felt that the way he immediately held Fremea in close to protect her was in the top 5 plays of his life.

(An adhesive non-lethal air stun gun...!?)

Hanzou gave more priority to the question before his eyes than to the fact that he had survived.

(It changed what kind of shell it was firing? So it can change out between various types of shells!!)

Recent smoothbore guns could use shells and anti-aircraft missiles with the same gun, so it was possible that powered suit could use guided weapons.

(No, speaking of recent ones...)

Hanzou thought while he sluggishly stood up and checked to make sure Fremea was safe in his arms.

(An Academy City smoothbore gun can hit a target 5000 meters away with greater than 95% probability even while firing rapidly and moving. Just because we're a small target is no reason that it shouldn't be hitting us from this distance...)

Of course, the pursuer had no reason to hold back.

And there was no way that powered suit had worse specs than a normal tank.

There had to be something there.

There had to be a reason it had failed to kill two flesh-and-blood humans who were only 300 meters away in an underground mall.

(...An underground mall...)

"So that's it."

Hanzou raised his head.

(It uses an electromagnetic signal for its precise aiming. That's fine in an open battlefield, but it can't compensate for an environment full of complex electromagnetic signals being reflected everywhere.)

In that regard, that model of powered suit would have trouble in urban warfare.

It had most likely been modified during World War III with the areas of little cover like the wide plains of Russia in mind and now that was working against it here.

If that was the case...

(If I had something I could use to purposefully reflect its signal or something that could send a powerful electromagnetic signal at its receiver, I could almost eliminate the threat of that gun.)

This was either a chance to turn things around or a chance to try for too much and make everything a lot worse.

Hearing the 8 legs approaching, Hanzou decided to just get away from there for the time being. He didn't know if he could lose that military suit even if he had a car, but he might be able to use its large size against it.

(Circling around brings in the possibility of getting shot by that machine gun on its left arm. That thing has to be adjusted to be used against human targets.)

Either way, he gained nothing by letting it get near him.

Passing through a narrow path would have been the standard strategy, but, as long as that smoothbore gun could force open the path, it could hardly be called absolutely safe.

(An exit...)

Hanzou held Fremea in his arms and slowly stood up.

(If only there were a non-standard exit I could trick it into letting me near...)

Of course, a solution wasn't just going to come out of nowhere. The various exits Hanzou had previously prepared in the underground mall came to his mind. He ended up choosing the option that would be most easily foreseen by his enemy but also required him to move his legs the least.

And then...

Strength suddenly left Hanzou's knees.

He fell to his knees and wasn't able to support Fremea's small body. He somehow managed not to fall completely over, but he could no longer walk straight ahead much less escape the military powered suit.

The cause was simple.

The two blasts he and Fremea had received hadn't been enough to kill them, but the two had still been damaged. The shockwaves had robbed Hanzou of strength from his very core and thrown his sense of balance out of whack.

(Oh...shit.)

When he tried to inhale, Hanzou realized that his jaw had frozen up.

(I didn't even notice the damage to my own body? Talk about a yellow light.)

The stairway out of the underground mall a few meters in front of him seemed oddly far away.

He couldn't get away.

He could only move about as fast as a caterpillar, so he simply couldn't get away from the powered suit. Thinking of how it had attacked Anti-Skill so calmly, there was no chance of it giving up even if he managed to get to a public place.

This pursuer was determined to kill Fremea.

Hanzou heard the sound of the 8 legs moving.

Crushing the fragments of building material underfoot, a gigantic figure appeared from around the corner. The way it moved in a human-like way as if it was staring at his face caused a chill to run down Hanzou's back.

Of course, no words were exchanged.

The powered suit merely accurately aimed its left arm at Hanzou and Fremea.

Instead of the smoothbore gun on its right arm, it was using the machine gun on its left arm that was for use on human targets.

(Kh...!!)

Honestly, there had been no need for him to stick with her this far.

She was the girl Komaba Ritoku had wanted to protect.

But that was nothing more than a sentimental reason. Nothing was forcing him to do this. According to his usual logic, he should abandon all conditions that lowered his odds of survival.

However...

He knew it was useless against a machine gun with a caliber of at least 18mm, but Hanzou immediately threw himself over Fremea. Why had he done that? What was that supposed to accomplish? He didn't have time to ask those questions.

Shortly thereafter the powered suit opened fire with its machine gun.

Accurately.

Mercilessly.

But it wasn't aiming at Hanzou or Fremea.

With a crash, a 4-door car slid down the stairway that led out of the underground mall.

A caliber of 18mm was larger than the bullets for large anti-armor rifles. Fifty rounds were fired in 10 seconds, so there was no question about what became of the family-use 4-door car.

By the time the car had gone down the stairs far enough for its front wheels to touch the floor, its hood was crushed, the engine was cracked, and the oil caught fire.

It exploded all at once.

The car didn't make it far enough to reach Hanzou, much less the powered suit.

All that reached him was heat, smoke, and a gust of wind that he felt on his skin.

(What fucking idiot was that!? What kind of meddlesome suicide was that!?)

However, the car continued on as a mere metal frame. Its previous speed kept the now-tireless wheels spinning.

The 8-legged suit silently prepared its smoothbore gun.

Even if the car directly hit the suit with its current speed, the damage wouldn't reach the person inside the suit. The pilot was being cautious on the off chance there were explosives in the car.

The suit fired unhesitatingly.

With a flash, the shell flew above Hanzou and Fremea's heads and blew up the remains of the car yet again. The car was not going to move forward any further. The explosion held enough force to blow the remaining metal frame to pieces.

The explosion caused enough of a blast to send Hanzou rolling further as he lay on the floor.

The destruction was enough to make him want to cover his eyes.

He was afraid to imagine what had happened to the driver of the car.

However...

(...What...?)

In the burning remains of the car, he could see no human form in the area where the driver's seat had been. At first he thought the person had merely been blown to pieces in the blast, but that wasn't it.

(There was no one inside...?)

The flames started to burn even brighter and the hot air caressed Hanzou's cheek. He instinctually turned his face away while lying on the ground.

That may have been the only reason he noticed it.

Hanzou just so happened to turn away from the exit and toward the powered suit.

And there he saw another form approaching behind the suit.

It was Hamazura Shiage.

The boy was carrying Anti-Skill equipment and sneaking toward the powered suit.

Normally, the 8-legged suit would gather information from all 360 degrees around it and know how many people were approaching and exactly where they were no matter how silently they moved. It would easily detect vehicles or people. After all, they were in an age where wirelessly-controlled vehicles packed with rockets that were only a few dozen centimeters big and attacked from within the grass were in use. The 8-legged suit was set up to accurately detect freely moving landmines the size of a large bento box, so no one would think an amateur high school student could approach it undetected.

However, there was one exception.

There was an instant where none of the sensors were working.

(The recoil and shockwave...just after firing the shell...!?)

That was what the empty car had been for.

It had created an opportunity for him to get close to the powered suit.

Also, in Hamazura's hands was a piece of equipment he had most likely snatched from the Anti-Skill group that had been taken out in the underground mall.

It was called an HsLH-02.

It was a linear hammer used to destroy steel doors.

At first glance, it looked like a bazooka, but inside was a giant stake with a flat end. Hamazura swung it back like a pendulum once and struck the powered suit with the muzzle.

There was no need for a trigger.

The shock applied to the muzzle area struck the target with the giant 20 kg stake at subsonic speed.

A tremendous noise of metal striking metal rang out.

Hamazura had aimed for one of the 8 legs. Specifically, the leg that had been lowering to the floor in order to support the weight of the suit as it moved. The horizontal blow essentially swept the suit's leg out from under it causing it to lose its balance.

The right half of the suit sunk down, but it avoided falling over.

That was when the second strike came.

Hamazura's linear hammer mercilessly struck the elbow area of the smoothbore gun that would normally have been too high to reach. A horrible noise that sounded like something inside the device had been twisted was heard and the giant gun wobbled like a fishing rod.

But that was all.

The gun didn't break to pieces or bend.

(No good!?)

Hanzou gritted his teeth. The linear hammer was made to smash, not to pierce. The end of the stake was flat so that it could apply force to an entire door and break it open.

That was good enough for breaking open a door, but it wasn't a good way to pierce armor.

The powered suit turned its smoothbore gun towards Hamazura in order to fire back with much more force than had caused its right arm to wobble.

But then it stopped moving as if it had realized something.

Its right elbow.

The spot Hamazura had hit it with the linear hammer.

That was where the opening to load a new shell was supposed to be. It was normally protected by a sliding door, but that protective door had been slightly bent.

It may have only been slightly, but the bent door could no longer slide which meant it could no longer open. If the suit could not load a new shell, it could not fire its smoothbore gun. Even if there was still a shell remaining inside, the gun could blow apart if it wasn't properly airtight.

The powered suit's shoulders moved up and down irregularly.

Clear anger resided behind that motion.

But Hamazura did not remain quiet.

The suit aimed the machine gun on its left arm towards Hamazura at about the same time Hamazura threw a box-shaped ashtray he had in one hand into the air and hit the bottom with the linear hammer.

The ashtray was made fairly heavy to keep it from being stolen and it was crushed as it was fired at tremendous speed. It struck the powered suit on its left wrist and averted the aim of the machine gun.

The short burst of bullets destroyed a wall instead of destroying Hamazura.

In that space of time, Hamazura operated the linear hammer to bring the 20 kg stake back inside the muzzle. He then swung it in an upwards arc.

The electromagnetically powered uppercut struck the lower portion of the suit's body where its sensors were located. Its fine-tuned and important radar receiver was crushed more than anything else.

That was the limit.

One of the 8 legs swung upwards and struck the linear hammer from below. That was all it took to knock it from Hamazura's grasp and have it stick in the ceiling. The powered suit used its electronic control to accurately control its stance and moved its useless right arm once more. The smoothbore gun may have been unusable, but it was still a giant hunk of composite armor that could be swung around with the might of a machine.

Hamazura's body doubled over.

The attack had been more of a twisted lariat than a punch and Hamazura struck the ground multiple times before he stopped.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!"

"Hamazura!!"

"Geh...bh....Run. Hanzou, we can get away now...!!"

Hamazura had been knocked over near Hanzou, but he still stood up, grabbed Hanzou's arm because Hanzou was still sitting there, and started moving. Hanzou realized that Fremea was about to slip from his grasp.

"Hama...zura. Take...Fremea."

"Damn it!! You're getting away too!!"

They ran through the burning hot air without flinching as they passed by the destroyed car and headed for the staircase out.

The powered suit moved its left arm.

Its 18mm machine gun began firing.

However, it couldn't use its electromagnetic signal to aim and the hot air from the burning car prevented it from using its infrared equipment. Its optical aiming that relied on visuals wouldn't work either because of all the black smoke.

In the very end, they were mostly saved by luck.

Hamazura, Hanzou, and Fremea ran up the stairs and above ground.

Part 2

The pilot checked how the 8-legged powered suit's right arm was doing and then headed for the exit staircase in order to begin pursuit.

He then received a transmission.

"You're done, Silver Cross."

"Was that really enough?"

"You accomplished your objective."

"Hey, hey. I thought only the two were necessary." The pilot gave a doubtful expression to the words of the person on the other end of the transmission. "It was supposed to be Fremea Seivelun and Hamazura Shiage. The third isn't needed. Letting an unneeded protector survive could lead to things getting off track again."

"You did enough. I don't think they'll become separated again now." The person on the other end of the transmission exhaled in what sounded like a scornful laugh. "Being the person who's supposed to get taken out is tough, isn't it?"

"You've got that right. I could have ended it all in one blow if I had used a canister shot."

"Isn't the model you're using unfit for this kind of battle? It uses wide area electromagnetic signal targeting because they had the plains of Russia in mind, so its accuracy falls in the city. It must have been tough not to kill them with that much firepower."

"Making an impact was important. This model, the Enemy Blaster, is perfect for that. And I'm the kind of man that knows how to do the right thing at the right time." He gave up on restoring the powered suit's right arm. "I'm heading back now, but how's the other side of the issue going? If that side doesn't move, this isn't going to go anywhere."

“Don’t worry.”

Hearing that, the pilot contacted the support personnel waiting above ground. He couldn’t exactly stride through the streets in that powered suit. He would use a special vehicle disguised as a large tourist bus in order to blend into the scenery of the city.

But when he did...

“Respond. What is it, Chameleon? Respond. ...Damn it, what happened?”

“I told you not to worry. The other side has begun to move.” The person on the other end of the transmission sneered “*Being the person who’s supposed to get taken out is tough, isn’t it?*”

♦

“What do you think?” muttered Misaka Worst.

About 200 meters away, dark smoke was rising from the entrance to an underground mall as if the entrance were a chimney. However, she wasn’t looking at that clear sign of an incident; she was looking at the large bus right in front of her.

Technically, it was an undercover vehicle for the city’s dark side.

The vehicle had been taken care of in no time at all.

Accelerator and Misaka Worst looked at the now powerless vehicle.

At first glance, it looked like a tourist bus with dark sunlight protectors in the windows. However, the inside was mostly empty as if to transport tanks, and it had the engine and suspension needed to carry around that much weight.

A couple of men in work clothes were collapsed on the ground, and inside the vehicle were specialized tools, a few different types of shells, armor plates, large battery packs, and other similar things. It seemed the vehicle was meant to carry something large because various latches were installed on the floor, walls, and ceiling so that its contents would not topple over in transit.

From the look of those latches...

“A powered suit,” Accelerator said under his breath.

Of course, this was not an Anti-Skill powered suit. They would have no reason to hide theirs.

He looked at the men he had defeated and at the black smoke rising in the distance and clicked his tongue.

"...Looks like things are getting to be a problem again."

"Uuh..."

He heard a groan.

One of the men collapsed inside the undercover vehicle had uttered it. This wasn't because the man had exceptional strength; it was only because Accelerator and Misaka Worst had purposefully let him remain conscious.

"I thought the darkness had been demolished," Accelerator addressed the man. "The hostages and negotiation materials that were tying down all the personnel were supposed to have been dealt with at the end of the war. I made sure of it. So who are you people?"

"...The Freshmen."

"Ahn?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Strength left the man's arms and legs after saying that. His eyes were still open, but he had clearly lost consciousness.

Misaka Worst cackled and then spoke.

"He has scars on his head. A chip must have cut off his consciousness. It's an anti-torture method. If we forcefully 'shook' him, we could probably bring him back. What should we do?"

"Leave him be."

"So it's time for the permanent marker?"

It seemed Misaka Worst was ready to turn the unconscious man into a Hoichi the Earless covered in words that weren't allowed on TV, but Accelerator ignored her.

He turned to the wall of the undercover vehicle.

A few maps were displayed there and some buildings and streets were marked with a highlighter. It seemed they had been investigating someone's activities.

Accelerator tore off the maps and the photograph stuck to the wall next to them.

The photograph had been printed on expensive printing paper used for photographs and it showed a girl of about 10 with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Her name was written in marker next to her face.

It was Fremea Seivelun.

Part 3

Hamazura and the others had cut back and forth through narrow alleys again and again.

That had been a counter measure for the powered suit, but they had no real proof that the suit had stopped following them. They had only stopped because they didn't have enough strength to run any further.

The three of them were breathing heavily.

"Hamazura..."

Hanzou called his friend's name in a low voice.

Hamazura gave a weary smile in response, but Hanzou grabbed his collar and pushed him against a wall.

"What the hell!? Why did you show up there, Hamazura!? Why did you get yourself involved in this!?"

Hanzou gritted his teeth.

He wasn't mad at Hamazura.

He was mad at himself for getting Hamazura involved.

He was thinking that speaking with Hamazura and going to the restaurant with him had all been a mistake.

"...You had gained what none of us in Skill-Out had been able to gain." Hanzou had been restraining his voice to a certain extent, but he lost control and his voice exploded out. "You had a girl! You were thinking about what to do in the future! You were going ahead on an honest path!! You were studying to open a road service!! So why did you come here and come back into contact with the darkness!? You...you may have destroyed your own dream!! Do you understand that, Hamazura!?"

"...I don't care..."

There was no clear determination in Hamazura's eyes.

He just shook his head weakly.

"I didn't want to get involved in this."

He didn't try to act tough.

This showed that the words tumbling from his mouth were how he truly felt.

"But I couldn't abandon you."

"..."

"When I heard you were in a bad situation and that Fremea Seivelun was involved too, Leader Komaba's face came to mind and...and there are a lot of complicated issues with the family name Seivelun..."

That wasn't the end of his thoughts, but Hamazura's words cut off there.

He finally gave up on expressing his view nicely and repeated just the most important part.

"...I couldn't abandon you."

"Dammit," spat out Hanzou and he let go of Hamazura's collar.

His back still to the wall, Hamazura slid down and sat on the ground. He looked up at Hanzou's face and asked a question.

"What are we going to do now?"

"It's best to think that none of my hideouts can be used anymore. If I call Kuruwa, she can probably get us something, but we need somewhere safe to stay while we wait for her. ...Hamazura, do you know somewhere we can hide out just for a short time?"

"You mean the kind of hideout that a delinquent might want...?"

As he spoke, Hamazura suddenly had an idea.

"Wait, I know."

"Where?" Hanzou asked.

Hamazura Shiage had connections with one non-delinquent organization.

Item.

The group wasn't working as Academy City's pawns at the moment, but some of their old connections still existed.

One of the places Item had used as a hideout was...

"A private salon in District 3. It's a bit expensive, but we can probably use it."

Part 4

Accelerator and Misaka Worst searched all through the undercover vehicle, but they didn't find any more information. They found nothing on who owned the powered suit or what organization used that equipment.

The two of them exchanged words after leaving the vehicle.

Misaka Worst waved around the photo they had acquired within the bus.

"It looks like they were plotting to attack this brat. Well, that's none of our business."

"..."

(This girl is...)

Accelerator recognized the girl in the photo.

He had seen her in an image on the cell phone belonging to Komaba Ritoku, a man he had eliminated in the past as an enemy who was threatening the peace of the city.

Komaba had bared his fangs against Academy City in order to protect a large number of Level 0s from violence. There had been one person he had fought to the very end in order to protect.

"Why would they bring out a military powered suit in order to kill one little brat? Misaka knows the danger someone represents doesn't always match how they look in this city of psychic powers, but then there should have been a report on her power and how to deal with it in there. This just feels like she's a Level 0 and they were just being extremely careful. ...Hm? What is it #1?"

"You go home without me."

Accelerator handed the shopping bags to Misaka Worst and looked at the maps covered in highlighted areas they had taken from the undercover vehicle.

“I’m going to go after her.”

“Hey, now.”

Misaka Worst sighed in exasperation and shook her head.

She showed the #1 the photo of Fremea Seivelun.

“This girl that we assume to be a Level 0 isn’t Last Order.”

“So what?” Accelerator spat out. “It’s true I have no real reason to protect her, but that’s no reason to just let her die.”

“Change that look in your eyes, you pervert!! You’re just protecting her because she’s small!! And yet you broke Misaka’s arm with no problem!!”

“...The composition of the city’s darkness has changed in some way and I can’t figure out what’s going on. Also, I don’t like the sound of the Freshmen that piece of shit mentioned before. There’s a chance they’ll bare their fangs at us, so I need to look into it. Are you really the kind of idiot that needs every little thing explained to her?”

“Well, we at least know the darkness is large enough to bring out a powered suit. Misaka wonders why they’re targeting that Fremea brat.”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure I’ll find out when I look into this.”

Accelerator walked off with his modern cane.

Misaka Worst rearranged the contents of the shopping bags in order to make an empty one, walked up behind Accelerator, and put the bag over his head in order to restrain him.

“Wait up.”

“Gmmh!!”

“Sorry for turning you into a robber from the Showa era with panty hose on his head.”

“...”

Accelerator hit the switch on the choker-style electrode around his neck.

Throughout normal life, he didn’t have enough power to walk without a cane, but, when he hit that switch, he could use the strongest psychic powers in Academy City.

He used the truly terrifying power of being able to manipulate the vectors of every kind of force to tear apart the plastic bag restraining his head from the inside.

"...Do you want to meet the same fate as that plastic bag?"

"Hehh. When you transcend good and evil, you can actually be pretty funny."

"What do you want?"

"Do you have any reason to do this much?" asked Misaka Worst with a large grin on her face. "As I said before, Fremea Seivelun isn't Last Order."

"Are you a fucking moron?" spat out Accelerator. "My objective is to assess the level and target of the threat. I don't give a fuck what happens to that brat. Of course, if it's necessary in order to eliminate the threat, I'll make some use of her."

"Ha ha. How kind of you."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Ehh? Misaka would prefer it if everything got 10 times worse. What would you do if Misaka said she was going to purposefully help out the enemy?"

"I'd give you 100 spankings."

For some reason, she responded to this by bringing a hand to her mouth and wiggling her hips back and forth.

"...And what if Misaka said she would be okay with that even if it was in public?"

Accelerator ignored her and began walking.

Accelerator went off to find a refrigerated coin locker to put the groceries in and Misaka Worst frantically ran after him.

Part 5

Private salons were one aspect of the service industry characteristic of Academy City. Simply put, they were something like a fancy karaoke box. Customers could rent the rooms based on time and have fun or throw parties or do whatever else they wanted inside.

Eighty percent of Academy City's residents were students and most of those lived in regulated student dorms.

Being under the eye of adults during classes and after school could be stressful. Private salons were a bit like secret hideouts that could be bought.

This setup had the danger of being about a step away from becoming a hotbed for sexual crimes, so it wasn't something to be completely admired. However, the very act of selling an area of freedom was an effective symbol of the social psychology of Academy City.

The numbered rooms in a large building had become something to be sold.

Hamazura and the others had fled to a room in one of those large buildings.

"..."

Hamazura lowered his gaze to the screen of his cell phone.

He had the numbers of Takitsubo, Kinuhata, and Mugino programmed into it.

Those three would surely be more help against an unknown enemy than the collection of Level 0s they currently were.

Item of course did not know what was going on, but they were out searching for him in a game, so (despite having to redo their game), if he told them the "solution", they would all gather.

However...

(...I just can't get them involved in this.)

He gritted his teeth and then turned off his phone.

Fremea Seivelun was Frenda's sister, so it wasn't as if this wasn't any of Item's business. Yet this had to do with the city's darkness, and that changed things. Hamazura didn't want to get them involved in order to protect himself.

Then Hanzou spoke to Hamazura ignorant of the issues he was thinking about.

"Hamazura, if you're going to make a phone call, use a dummy SIM. I've got a few of them if you need one."

"No, that's fine."

Hamazura shook his head.

He looked over at Fremea's back as she operated the large TV with the remote control. He spoke to Hanzou in a low voice.

“What are we going to do? We know Fremea is being targeted by the dark side of the city, but why does she have to be attacked by such dangerous people?”

“I actually don’t know any of the details,” said Hanzou in a stiff voice. “It isn’t anything about her herself. The school’s System Scan has her as a Level 0, so she doesn’t have any huge value as far as a DNA map goes and I don’t think she’s had a chance to contact the real darkness out there. All I know is that she had a point of contact with me and Leader Komaba.”

“...”

“So I’m assuming it has something to do with Skill-Out or its former leader, Komaba Ritoku.”

“As you well know, that’s just a group of delinquents.”

Fremea was flipping through channels a bit away, but it didn’t look like she was finding a show that she liked. The talk shows were just going over serious news about most countries accepting Academy City even though its belligerent interactions had been one of the things that led to World War III. This was because Academy City had paid out large amounts of money to pay for reconstruction after the war.

“Is there something those at the very top of Academy City, the ones that hold the administrative power, want enough to take someone’s life to get?”

“As I’m sure you know, when Leader Komaba led Skill-Out, he had a large-scale plan in order to revolt against Academy City. I played a major role in creating the plan. Of course, it ended up failing.”

It seemed Fremea was not interested in a commentator going on about a conspiracy theory about Academy City altering the balance of power in how they regulated the balance of the funds they gave out. The conspiracy theory was quieted as she flipped through the channels.

“It’s possible Leader Komaba prepared a spare plan back then. One that dealt with a vulnerability in the city other than the one we were using.”

“Then...”

“Those at the top would want to deal with that, right? And Fremea was under Komaba’s care. They might be thinking that he gave her a hint just in case.”

“But the main plan was destroyed so easily. If this spare plan was so great, why didn’t he use it instead?”

“They don’t care about our plan. They just want to utterly destroy any vulnerability in the city.”

That was assuming it had to do with Komaba Ritoku.

However, Hamazura knew of another point of contact with Fremea Seivelun.

Frenda.

And the group Frenda was part of, Item.

That group contained a Level 4 effective at battle, one of the seven Level 5s, and a girl who was said to have the possibility of becoming the eighth. They were a skilled organization that had been prepared by the dark side of the city in order to eliminate the elements of unrest within the city.

Since Fremea was Frenda’s sister, it was possible this had to do with Item via Frenda.

(Frenda was a member of Item, but I didn’t know what they were doing 24/7. Could she have been working on some other project on the side?)

He didn’t have enough information.

Why was she being targeted? How large was the organization after her? How serious were they? If he knew what they were after, he might be able to put together a way to survive.

“...Fremea has no clue what it could be, but there’s no mistaking that the darkness even brought out a powered suit to target her. We have to look into this while staying on the run.”

“We’ll fight back once we’ve ensured her safety,” said Hanzou as he headed for the exit.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to contact Kuruwa. I wouldn’t exactly call this place safe. This will be our relay point. We’ll use Kuruwa’s network to find a safe hideout to move to.”

“Is it safe to contact her?”

“I already told you. I’m going to put a dummy SIM in my phone. Even if they’re monitoring my number, they won’t be able to trace my call to the antenna it’s using.”

Hanzou grabbed the doorknob as he spoke.

When he opened the door, he turned around.

“Hamazura.”

“What?”

“You really saved us back there. I’m not happy with what you did, but I’ll admit that much.”

Before Hamazura could respond, Hanzou had left the room.

Hamazura felt a little awkward and his gaze wandered around the room until his and Fremea’s eyes met.

This was the girl Komaba Ritoku had risked his life to protect.

She was also the little sister of Frenda, one of the main members of Item.

“Long time no see.”

When Komaba had still been alive, Hamazura and Hanzou had spoken with her. They hadn’t even known her name at the time.

“Do you remember me?”

“Yes. In the first place, you’re one of the people with Komaba-oniichan.”

Hamazura smiled slightly at how she remembered him.

He could no longer think of Komaba except in the past tense.

But he couldn’t let her know about the painful things that came with the passage of time.

“That’s right. I’m Hamazura Shiage. Nice to meet you again.”

“I’m Fremea. Fremea Seivelun.”

Hamazura felt as if he should have learned of her family name sooner, but he didn’t say anything about it.

“Things got a bit rough back there. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. My ears were hurting a bit ago, but in the first place I’m fine now. Nyah.”

(...Where in Japan did she learn “nyah”?)

He didn't recall her saying that when he had spoken with her before.

That raised a question in his mind, but asking about it wouldn't help anything there.

He was lucky enough she knew Japanese.

"In the first place, what are we going to do now?"

"Hanzou is calling a friend, so you don't have to worry."

"Where's Komaba-oniichan?" Fremea looked up at him with her blue eyes. "I haven't seen him in a while. He doesn't answer his phone and I haven't seen him on the roads I usually see him on. In the first place, do you know where he's gone?"

Hamazura tried to keep his voice from catching in his throat.

He wasn't sure if he succeeded.

"He's, well..."

He managed to put on a smile.

But her blue eyes saw through him better than a lie detector.

"He isn't a very smart person. I know it isn't right for someone like me to say that, but he really isn't. So he's been stuck in supplementary lessons at school. If he doesn't do that, he'll end being held back. Can you keep that a secret for a while?"

"...Yeah," Fremea said with a slight nod.

Her voice sank, but it was only at the level of someone breaking their promise about coming to play on a day off.

"In the first place, I understand."

Fremea plopped down on the sofa that was much too big for her.

"Mh."

"?"

"My stomach almost growled, but then it didn't."

She leaned back in the sofa and put her small hands on her stomach.

Hamazura frowned.

"...Do you want something to eat?"

Fremea gave a small nod in response.

Just like in a karaoke box, the private salon let you order food over an inner line. There was also a large refrigerator in the spacious room.

Hamazura didn't know what kind of food Fremea liked, so he decided to order various things over the inner line. While Hamazura was talking into the phone on the wall, Hanzou returned.

"Kuruwa will be here before long. ...What are you doing, Hamazura?"

"Ordering some food."

"We just ate."

"It's for Fremea."

"Oh, well order some satsuma age while you're at it."

It took about 10 minutes for the food to get there.

Instead of main dishes, it was mostly side dishes such as French fries and vegetable sticks.

"...The satsuma age just doesn't fit in with the rest."

"Shut up. I'm going to eat them all myself, so it doesn't matter."

Hamazura and Hanzou moved some food from the large plates onto their smaller plates, but Fremea was acting oddly.

She put some kanitama on her small plate, but, when she noticed the green-colored bean-like objects that were in it, she passed her small plate to Hamazura.

"Green peas," she said.

"W-what? Why are you passing me a bunch of peas?"

Fremea was precisely removing the green peas and giving them to Hamazura.

“I see. So you don’t like green peas,” responded Hamazura.

“Nyaaoohhn”

“But you’re too old for that. You need to know that the world isn’t always so kind. Have your green peas back.”

“Fgyaaaaaaaahh!?” screamed Fremea now that she had a mountain of peas twice the size it was before.

After that, Hamazura got in a fight with Hanzou when Hanzou put salt directly on the large plate of fries and there was a dispute over whether the vegetable sticks should have mayonnaise or dressing on them, but the dark atmosphere was mostly swept away. They had just been attacked by that 8-legged powered suit, but it didn’t look like Fremea was in any kind of emotional shock.

It was possible that the feelings just hadn’t caught up with her yet.

Part 6

Meanwhile, there were other people who found Hamazura and the others’ actions to be odd.

Mugino Shizuri and the rest of Item.

They had split up to search around the city for Hamazura, but they had each caught scent of the familiar smell of the darkness.

Take Mugino for example.

She was leaning up against a wall in order to gather information.

More precisely, she was connected to the building’s security cameras with a long, thin cable stretching from the fake eye built into her eyepatch. Of course, she had no interest in the building itself; the camera was just a gateway. Through it she entered the security company’s network and went through the footage archives to see if Hamazura was in them.

Her flesh-and-blood brain was directly connected to the mechanical eye, but there was additional meaning there.

It meant she could directly receive information from the machine.

Of course, it had to be translated into information a human could detect, so it wasn't perfect and she mostly relied on images through the fake eye's system. However, she could do things that were impossible with a normal interface.

While an image search was being carried out at high speed behind her forehead, Mugino used her spare hand to operate her cell phone.

It was in "Chat Mode" where it could communicate on multiple lines at once.

"A powered suit went nuts in an underground mall in District 7. In a few hours, the higher ups will probably have revised the footage and debunked the rumors so that it 'didn't happen'."

"I found that super fast by intercepting Anti-Skill radio. Originally, a boy and a girl were being targeted. Later, another boy super joined in. The three of them super got away from the powered suit and ran off above ground. Did the cameras get any of their faces?"

"The first two weren't him. The guy who came later is...I can't tell. The smoke gathered around the ceiling, so I can only tell there was someone there."

"But," Mugino added, "I think the original boy is someone Hamazura would talk with. And the girl looks somehow familiar..."

"Oh, so you even super looked into all the people Hamazura knew? Yanderes can be super scary."

"...Kinuhata, I can see the things around you. Could you grab that thick thing over there and shove it up your ass?"

"I'm super not interested in size and thickness, so no thank you. Anyway, let's continue the super Hamazura Search. Hee hee hee. Let's see what finds the super right answer faster: security cameras or radio information."

"Ahn? At this rate, won't Takitsubo be the punishment bunny?"

When Mugino asked that frank question, the rabbit girl Takitsubo Rikou spoke up for the first time in the conversation with a trembling voice.

"...A signal is coming from north-north-east... I sense that Hamazura is flirting with another girl...!!"

"Mugino, I'm most afraid of that super vague medium. We need to go all out so that we don't end up being a super unsightly bunny in front of that idiot."

Part 7

“Kuruwa sure is taking her time,” said Hanzou as he leaned back in the private salon’s sofa.

Hamazura and Fremea were checking out what was inside the spacious room. There were card games and board games on some shelves and a video game system was installed next to the large TV. It seemed the TV could also be used to browse the internet.

It also had a satellite connection, so there were more than 300 channels to choose from. This meant that it would take a long time to find something to watch even if there was something you wanted to watch on. Fremea had given up on finding something to watch and the TV was left on news about the end of World War III. It was something about the weapons not needed now that the war was over being transported to Districts 2 and 23.

Hamazura quickly gave up on the TV, sat down on the sofa, and started looking through the road service reference book, but then someone grabbed the edge of his clothes. He looked up and saw Fremea looking bored.

At her request, he started looking for a multiplayer game.

Because of the type of facility they were in, there were a lot of party games that could be played with a lot of people.

It might have been imprudent to turn towards hobbies and time-killing devices at a time like that, but it might have been a defensive reaction of their minds. If they sat still and went crazy, they would have lost everything. They would win by safely returning to their everyday lives. That 8-legged thing wasn’t a part of their fates.

“Hamazura, in the first place, I want to play that.”

Fremea stretched out her hands, but she couldn’t reach her target which was on the top shelf.

The shelf had video games lined up on it.

“This?”

“No. Not something that’s in the first place as boring as that.”

“Then this?”

“To the right. To the right. Farther right. No left. In the first place, there.”

Hamazura moved his finger along the shelf as he listened to Fremea, but then he felt something heavy on his back. Fremea was using him in place of a ladder to get her small frame up to the shelf.

“This,” she said as she pulled a game from the shelf.

“...No, that’s...”

“I want to play Blood & Destroy.”

“What kind of title is that? That just makes it sound like it’s full of horrible things! Look, the screenshots on the back of the package are almost all blood red!!”

It looked like a shooting game where a grim-faced guy shot lots of zombies. It practically screamed “For the foreign market!!” When he carefully read the instructions, it seemed the protagonists were the ones doing the chomping. The tagline was “Let’s drive back the allies of justice!!”

Hamazura carefully chose his words.

“L-look, doesn’t this one with the fluffy pets look fun?”

“Blood & Destroy.”

“What about A Stroll with the Mermaid Princess?”

“Blood & Destroy.”

“The Meadows of-”

“I want to play it!!”

Fremea held the blood-red package in her hands, hid her mouth behind it, and stared up at him.

Hamazura paused for a second.

“...I’m not going to let you, but can I take a picture of that?”

“Gyaaoohhh!!”

The two of them got all worked up and Hanzou stood up from the sofa.

“...Kuruwa is taking too long. I’m going to try to contact her again.”

While Fremea looked over at the cell phone screen, Hamazura gestured to Hanzou with his fingers.

The gesture was saying that they couldn't stay there much longer.

"I know that," muttered Hanzou in what was almost a sigh. "I know that."

Part 8

A certain gigantic dump truck's driver's seat was higher than the second floor of a building.

The back was the size of a pool and seemed to be full of black stones, but that was just a disguise. The outside of the inner domed space was made to look that way.

On the inside it was a maintenance area.

A maintenance area for a powered suit.

The sound of chemical springs creaking could be heard.

Those springs were inside the powered suit and it normally creaked like that whenever it did anything. It was sort of like the rustling of clothing, but there was a rumor that it had an effect on the minds of people who weren't used to hearing it if they heard it for long periods of time.

"Silver Cross"

"I'm ready, but isn't this a tad indirect?"

"At this rate, there are too many lines. It would be best if we cut down a few more branches."

"Kuroyoru, does that mean...?"

"Yes, I'll be heading out."

"If we're limiting the lines, wouldn't it be better if you started with crushing Item?"

"Crushing things one by one in order is the fastest way. Also, you failed last time. Having the direction the branches are growing in change would be a problem."

"I thought you had urged for retreat regarding that."

“Even without, it’ll be fine. Things weren’t exactly perfect from the get-go.”

“Don’t forget the purpose of pruning.”

“I know. The foundation of pruning is to choose the thickest, strongest branch. In that way, that branch is the thickest and yet easiest to handle.”

“So you’re saying bloodshed and danger will become water that makes the branches grow.”

“Let’s recheck our plans. I’ll be heading for Hamazura Shiage. You support me with the ‘bees’. We can leave Accelerator alone for now. The fewer risks the better. The other side has begun moving. Once the moat is filled, it’ll all naturally connect like a magnet.”

“Is this really okay? It would be safer to take out Item first with a surprise attack. Once Hamazura gets involved due to the attack on Fremea Seivelun, it’s likely they’ll show up.”

“I don’t mind if that happens. It saves me the effort of finding them.”

“Kuroyoru.”

“Silver Cross, are you worried about Mugino Shizuri? Or is it Kinuhata Saiai?”

“It’s the Dark May Project.”

“Hmph. Kinuhata? Don’t worry. You’re getting worried over nothing.”

In what seemed like the person on the other end of the transmission’s habit, she responded with a bit of scorn mixed in.

“After all, I was above her in attack power from the very start of that project.” The girl spoke quickly. “And now I’ve gone beyond the frame of a mere esper.”

“Is that so?”

“Aren’t you being a little more subdued than before? Even if you’re just my support, you haven’t used a 2-legged one in a while.”

“Like I said before: I’m the kind of man that knows how to do the right thing at the right time.”

The powered suit responded with the creaking of its chemical springs.

“I got results, didn’t I? This is the same. It isn’t about which one’s the best. There are times to use Enemy Blaster and there are times to use Bee Launcher.”

“So we’ll go ahead as planned?”

“Yes.”

“Fremea Seivelun it is.”

The person on the other end of the transmission gave praise with words of scorn.

“That brat really is quite useful.”

Between the Lines 3

The reason Level 0s started being attacked was Skill-Out.

It was them who first started attacking espers.

That said, they didn’t actually get into fist fights. It was more like slight arguments. However, as Skill-Out grew larger, the delinquent side grew stronger.

But the revenge for that did not stop with just Skill-Out. If a Level 0 was walking around the city and the espers didn’t like it, that Level 0 would end up being the target. The brunt of the damage did not fall on the armed groups of Skill-Out. It fell on the truly innocent Level 0s.

It went from elementary school students to college students. There was no discrimination in the targets. And the attacks were gruesome. The violence spread in no time.

A call for “Just Revenge” was given online and it gathered half-serious responses. As the situation escalated, a large number of powerful espers announced they were taking part in it. It no longer had anything to do with the original people. It was just a desire to act violently and hit people free of risk and free of guilt. It was a means of relieving stress. Just for that, a large number of people began being attacked out of nowhere.

And amid it all, there was one post on a BBS.

“I found an idiot school. All the students are Level 0. It’s because of schools like that that everything is getting so violent. We need to bring a hammer to this incarnation of evil. I need people to help me take out the trash.”

The indicated school was the kind of elementary school you could find anywhere.

The students that attended the school had no connection to Skill-Out.

But that kind of logic didn't get through to the attackers. All of them just couldn't get over the fact that they had been made a fool of by Level 0s once. By that point, the attackers themselves didn't even really know who it was they were attacking.

Komaba Ritoku did not like conflict.

But...

For that very reason...

He decided that they had to take responsibility with their own hands.

CHAPTER 4

The Right to Become a Good Person and the Right to Reject It. *Black.*

Part 1

"They're late..." muttered an annoyed Yomikawa Aiho in a room of her apartment that was too high-class for a teacher's salary. "How long does it take to get groceries at a nearby supermarket?"

"There's nothing wrong with messing around," said Yoshikawa Kikyou, a former researcher who was sprawled out on a soft sofa watching a rerun of a drama. "They are kids after all."

"Well, yes, but..."

"Mmhhh."

Unlike the two languid adults, Last Order seemed quite upset. She was pacing back and forth between the window leading to the balcony and the TV.

"...Misaka has a bad feeling about this, says Misaka as Misaka thinks deeply about it."

"?"

"The new Misaka is always getting in the way around here and who knows what she could be doing to him right now...Ah, could Misaka be having her scenes taken from her!? says Misaka as Misaka expresses her shock!!"

"Kikyou, what do you think of this?"

"You mustn't underestimate the brain before the formation of the secondary sexual characteristics, Aiho. Broadness and discontinuity of thoughts aren't the norm then."

"But Misaka has no intention of inheriting those pitiful aspects from the original! says Misaka as Misaka quickly takes action!! Misaka is ready to find a solution at any time!!"

A metallic slam reached Yomikawa's ears.

It took her a second to realize it was the sound of the door being opened and closed.

"...Huh?"

The small girl had disappeared.

When the two women headed to the entrance and saw that the small shoes were missing, they frantically began the search.

Part 2

"Odd." Hanzou lowered his gaze to his cell phone in annoyance. "No matter how many times I try and how many different ways I try, I can't contact Kuruwa."

"Hey, does that mean...?"

"They know I ran off with Fremea. They may have picked up everyone that might help me."

"We should try to find her."

"How?" Hanzou responded. "We aren't likely to find her if we just randomly run around. Also...we don't even know if she's still alive."

"Then...!!" Hamazura said as if to interrupt him. "Then we should search for her now. Just because you can't contact her doesn't necessarily mean that Kuruwa-chan's fate is sealed. This could be the critical moment. Maybe she's too busy dealing with them to answer the phone. Whatever it is, we need to do something. If we don't do anything, her odds of survival aren't good."

But how exactly were they supposed to find her?

Hamazura slowly paced around the private salon thinking.

"Do you have an idea where she would go? Like a store she often goes to."

"If she really is in danger, she would avoid that kind of place."

"There has to be something we can use to find her... GPS, security cameras, security robots, anything. Is there any kind of system we can use?"

"Kuruwa always walks around choosing routes that won't be picked up by those kinds of things."

“That’s it!” Hamazura spread a map out on the table. “Paths that aren’t picked up by anything are actually pretty rare. Especially with the security robots. Hanzou, draw some lines on the map with a marker. We’ll have much better odds if we search around certain lines rather than searching the entire city.”

“Even if there aren’t very many, it’s like the holes in a net. It won’t be that easy...”

“The security robots patrol according to a pattern. Depending on the times, the holes in the net are closed up. When I saw her before, Kuruwa-chan was in District 7. If we mark the safe paths in District 7 and the surrounding districts, we can then look at the security robot schedule to mark off the paths that were unusable at the time.”

“I get it. I get it,” said Hanzou as started drawing lines on the map.

Fremea looked at Hamazura and Hanzou with an anxious expression, but they didn’t have time to care for her then.

Hamazura looked down at the marked map.

“What do I need to do?”

“No.” Hanzou shook his head. “You stay here. Fremea’s safety comes first.”

“But you need help, right!?”

“We can’t leave her alone! And taking her out into danger along with us is out of the question!”

The two boys glared at each other for a bit, but Hamazura finally averted his gaze.

“Dammit,” he spat out and looked around the room. “...We can’t stay here for too much longer.”

“I’m leaving now. Take care of Fremea while I’m gone. This floor has three exits. Hamazura, if it comes to it, take her and run.”

“I will. I promise.” Hamazura nodded. “You make sure you bring Kuruwa-chan back with you, okay?”

They lightly hit their hands together and Hanzou left the private salon.

After the door closed, it felt like silence began oozing into the air.

It gave Hamazura a vision of them disappearing one by one.

Part 3

Kuroyoru Umidori was a girl that stood out quite a bit.

She was about 12 years old. Her black hair came down to about her shoulder-blades, but it was accented so that the hair near her ears was bleached blonde.

For clothing, she wore a white coat with only the hood over her head. Her arms were not in the sleeves. Below that...could perhaps be described as punk. Her small frame tightly fit inside clothing made of black leather and studs.

Her clothes looked more suited to someone on stage than someone walking around town.

The plastic dolphin doll under her arm went in a completely different vector than her odd outfit and it just felt out of place.

She didn't sneak around.

She walked openly into the private salon building through the main entrance.

She got on the escalator to the 2nd floor. She approached the reception counter that was much like the front desk at a hotel and asked the young man working there part-time a question.

"I'm looking for some people. Hamazura Shiage and Fremea Seivelun. I know they're using this facility. I want to know what room of what floor they're using."

"Miss..."

At first, the young man put on a fake smile, but, once he saw that Kuroyoru's expression wasn't changing, he thought back to the manual for these kinds of situations.

"Our facility has a duty to protect the personal information of our customers. I'm very sorry, but I can't reveal information regarding to the usage of the rooms."

This was the very basic of the business especially because the private salons were secret hideouts used to be free of being observed by adults. If they gave away the information on what people were doing, it would defeat the entire purpose of going there.

However, Kuroyoru merely smiled.

"That's fine. They probably rented it under a fake name, but I thought I'd ask just to be sure."

"I-I see."

The young man was conflicted over whether he should confirm or deny that possibility.

Then Kuroyoru continued.

“Whether the answer is here or not doesn’t change what I must do.”

“?”

The young man didn’t have time to express his question.

Directly afterwards, something shot directly by the side of his face at high speed and struck the wall behind him. It was an obsolete pay phone that had been set up in case of emergency.

It shot by at such high speed that the phone was smashed to pieces and a large dent a few centimeters in was made in the tough wall. That had been enough force to put a human’s life in danger had they been directly hit.

“Ee...”

The young man was confused, but he knew that the girl hadn’t thrown it.

The other customers didn’t panic. They couldn’t panic. The dangerous aura emitted by the girl and the unusual phenomenon had sealed their movements.

Something strange floated up behind the girl. It was a ring-shaped machine about 70 cm in diameter. Inside the ring was a propeller shaped similarly to a shampoo hat. It provided both lift and propulsion. A chainsaw-like blade was surrounding the outside of the ring.

Objects would get caught on the protruding parts of the blade and build up centrifugal force. Then the objects could be thrown with great destructive force if released with the proper timing.

As if to explain how it worked, the machine’s blade “grabbed” a metal trash can and began rotating it at high speed. In a few seconds, it was moving so fast it could only be seen as an afterimage.

However, the young man didn’t have time to scream.

From directly behind him, the horrible noise of gears meshing together could be heard. No, that wasn’t what it was. Technically, it was the sound of numerous chainsaw blades tearing through the wall.

Tearing.

It was more destruction than it was cutting.

“Wh-wha—!?”

He wasn’t even allowed to turn around.

Before he could, chainsaws came from a few different directions and stopped a few millimeters away from his neck.

Because he had 4 of those killer disks surrounding him and aiming for his neck, he couldn’t even carelessly collapse. He was a sneeze away from decapitation.

“Don’t kill him *yet*,” said Kuroyoru in a bored sounding voice.

It sounded more like she was talking to someone controlling the machines than to the machines themselves.

(Now then, I suppose I should make this as easy to understand as possible.)

Kuroyoru arbitrarily decided to kick a metal magazine rack about as tall as she was. The metal fixture came to pieces and she pulled a rod-like piece from the various parts. She lightly tapped it against one of the killer disks that were next to the young man’s neck.

“E-eeee!!”

A pathetic scream escaped his lips, but the killer disks didn’t move. They must have had some way of maintaining their position, because the chainsaws were as stable as one bolted to a stand. The rod-shaped metal part Kuroyoru held let off sparks and a slicing noise was heard as part of it was sliced cleanly off at a diagonal.

She stuck the end that was now pointed like a bamboo spear between his eyes.

“You seem to be mistaken, so I’ll correct you. This isn’t the kind of torture scene you’ve likely seen in movies or TV dramas. This isn’t a situation where I absolutely must get the information here by any means necessary.”

Sweat was pouring from the young man due to tension and fear. From up in the floor above, he could hear screams and trampling feet. Disturbances were occurring elsewhere, too. The killer disks could fly through the air and freely cut through the walls and windows, so they could directly enter the upper floors.

“Whether you talk or not, I can still get my answer.” Kuroyoru spoke calmly. “What’ll you do? Either way’s fine. Are you going to choose to die needlessly?”

Not only did he look up the room number, but he also lent her the employee master key.

With that so-so result, Kuroyoru tossed aside the metal rod and left the counter in a good mood. She took the plastic dolphin doll from under her arm and tossed it above her head. It must have had some Velcro on it or something, because it stuck to the coat on her back.

She spread out her now empty hands.

“Now then. I suppose it’s about time I really got down to business.”

With a slight noise, colorless and transparent spears shot out of her palms.

This was the weapon known as a psychic power given only to the students in that city.

Part 4

Mugino Shizuri was stopped in the middle of the street.

It was partially due to having very few hints to help her with the Hamazura Search she had made a humiliating punishment game out of with the other members of Item.

However, there was a more immediate reason.

A girl around 10 years old was grabbing at her coat.

The girl had short light brown hair.

She had a vigorous-looking face.

(...I feel like I’ve seen her before. Where was it? I think it was in some report...)

“What?”

“Stop that beeping, says Misaka as Misaka gives her request. It’s a faint signal to begin with, so that just makes it even harder to find, says Misaka as Misaka explains the situation.”

“...?”

Mugino’s eyebrows lowered in a puzzled expression.

It wasn’t because she didn’t understand what the girl was talking about.

(...How does she know about my artificial eye and artificial arm?)

“That beep beep beep beep! No more beep beep beep beep!”

Mugino was getting fed up with having her coat tugged on, so she switched off her artificial eye. Her field of vision narrowed a bit and she lost her depth perception, but it wasn’t enough to be an impediment in everyday life.

The mysterious mini-girl moved her head to the left and the right slowly as the ahoge on the top of her head swayed in the wind.

“Okay, Misaka has it, says Misaka as Misaka captures the location of her target. Really. Scanning for someone who doesn’t have a proper network account is hard, says Misaka as Misaka says something controller-like.”

(Does she have a search-type power like Takitsubo?)

However, Mugino was not at such a dead end with the Hamazura Search that she would recruit the girl for help.

Instead...

“...That’s an amazing coat you have there. Woah, what’s this? It’s covered in thick fur.”

“Hee hee hee. It was made in the Elizalina Alliance of Independent Nations, says Misaka as Misaka boasts about her coat. But your coat looks pretty warm, too. That’s the type of super lightweight cold-resistant fiber that traps air in tiny tubes, isn’t it? says Misaka as Misaka acts like a know-it-all.”

Last Order had grabbed the edge of Mugino’s skirt along with the coat and she was swinging them up and down like flapping wings.

She then realized something.

“But your underwear looks chilly, says Misaka as Misaka expresses her surprise.”

“That’s because they’re see-through. Being in charge of the sexy side of things has its hardships.”

After that odd back and forth, the two parted ways.

They were both in search of someone.

Anyone who had known the #4 as she once was would have been astonished at this, but it was just yet another change in the personality of the person known as Mugino Shizuri.

Part 5

It had been a few minutes since Hanzou had left the room.

A type of discomfort was ever so slightly stabbing at Hamazura's nerves. After thinking about it for a short bit, he realized it was due to a noise. The room was soundproofed pretty well, but he could hear what sounded like a number of people making a racket. And it wasn't just from a single direction. It sounded like he was surrounded by the noise.

"Hamazura."

"It's fine," he responded to Fremea's uneasy voice.

He had no proof of that of course.

He grew very conscious of the presence of Takitsubo and the others' numbers in his phone, but he stifled his desire to call for help.

He couldn't get them wrapped up in a problem this big.

"Hanzou is out getting someone who will help us out. Once she's here, the situation will turn around. So it's fine."

Surely Hanzou would find Kuruwa safe and sound and bring her back. She had plenty of hideouts Hamazura and Hanzou didn't know about, so there was no reason to fear their pursuers. They didn't know how to "win" in their situation and it wasn't even clear what was required to "win", but, whether they would just continue hiding or counterattack, having a safe place was a major step in the right direction. As such, they could change the situation for the better if they could only meet up with Kuruwa.

That was how Hamazura saw the situation, but a sudden noise tore at his ears.

A loud noise like giant gears tearing at the wall came from the other side of the private salon's wall.

It didn't sound like some kind of machine moving in the hallway.

The door itself was clearly vibrating.

"Wh-what!? What in the first place is going on...!?"

"Get back!!" Hamazura immediately yelled and moved in front of Fremea, but he couldn't think of anything else to do.

He wasn't even sure what was going on. However, the situation advanced regardless.

It advanced in a way that helped their opponent.

With a loud crashing noise, the door collapsed inwards.

It hadn't been opened; it collapsed.

Hamazura realized the two hinges and the deadbolt near the knob had been sliced off once he saw the things that flew inside the room through the door.

A noise pounded the air that sounded like the sound of a bee's wings amplified a couple thousand times.

And the grating noise of gears and chains was mixed in.

The sources of the noise were disks.

They had a radius of about 70 centimeters. The inside of their metal "border" contained two sets of propellers that looked like shampoo hats. These propellers provided lift and propulsion. The center axis of the propellers was completely hollow. A single stake may have gone through that portion of them when they were stored.

They were unmanned scouting devices that were either remotely or AI controlled.

If that was all, it wouldn't have been so bad.

The problem was with the "border".

The source of the noise of gears and chains was the chainsaw surrounding the circular border. The name of the machines printed on the top of their borders, Edge Bee, gave Hamazura a really bad feeling about how they could be used.

"Fuck!?"

Three of them flew into the room. Instead of continuing on like bullets, they stopped in midair and then slowly floated around surrounding Hamazura. The action was similar that of hornets capturing their prey.

Even in Academy City, a city flooded with cleaning robots and security robots, one didn't often have a chance to see machines that dangerous.

There was really only one possibility that came to Hamazura's mind.

"The pursuers...? But how did they find us?"

Then he realized it.

(Was it from Hanzou leaving to go find Kuruwa-chan? They took the images of Hanzou's movements through the city from the security cameras and robots and traced where he came from!! That means the Kuruwa-chan thing was fake. They didn't need to go to the risk of capturing her. They probably just blocked our transmissions!!)

Of course, doing that wasn't exactly easy.

They had freely used the city's video surveillance network and communications network and they had found the specific cell phone their targets were using and blocked only it. They were most likely using the unmanned scouting devices to cover for the areas the surveillance network didn't.

Their pursuers had to be people who had the consent of those at the administrative level of the city and they could clearly use the facilities of that level of the city.

"I-in the first place, what are we going to do?"

"Run away, of course. We gain nothing by playing with toys this dangerous."

These were killer weapons that could freely fly through the sky and use their chainsaws to cut right through doors and walls.

Hamazura wasn't stupid enough to think he could destroy them in a fair fight.

Facing them would do nothing but get himself injured.

(...The exit.)

Hamazura looked around the area.

(...We have to get out of this room!!)

The private salon only had one door, but one of the Edge Bees was hovering near it, so they couldn't approach it.

They might not be able to get past it when the machines attacked.

They may not be able to run away, much less win.

(These unmanned scouting devices use contra-rotating propellers to maintain their position and to provide both lift and propulsion. That means their weakness is...)

"Listen up, Fremea. When I give the sign, you run full speed for the exit."

"But..."

“Don’t worry.”

Hamazura looked over at a floor lamp while keeping the movements of the Edge Bees in his peripheral vision. Their chainsaws continued to rotate making an ominous noise.

“I’ll draw them in. So you head straight out the exit once that disk leaves it. Understand?”

Fremea gave a slight nod.

Hamazura slowly approached the table and reached for a plastic glass.

“Now!!”

As he yelled, Hamazura threw the glass at the Edge Bee hovering near the exit. The glass struck the wall next to the Edge Bee, but the Edge Bee still reacted. All three of them immediately took action in what seemed like an overreaction.

They moved to slice Hamazura.

“Run!!”

“But... In the first place, what is going to happen to you!?”

“Just go! I’ll make sure to catch up with you!!”

Hamazura grabbed the floor lamp with both hands and Fremea ran out the exit as if she had been pushed out by his yelling.

After ensuring she had made it out, he turned his gaze back to the approaching weapons. He threw the floor lamp at the Edge Bees as hard as he could.

This time, the object hit one of them, but that was all. As Hamazura had expected, it didn’t take the Edge Bee out. In fact, the lamp stuck to the chainsaw surrounding the machine.

“Wha—?”

Hamazura looked on in surprise as the lamp revolved at high speed. It was gaining centrifugal force. And then the blunt object was accurately fired back at him.

Its speed rivaled that of an arrow.

Hamazura twisted his body with all his might and just barely managed to avoid it. The lamp struck the wall and pierced into it like a spear.

(The way the blade is set can be changed to either grab or cut!!)

When he thought about it, he realized that the cuts to the door hadn't been all that clean. It seemed less like the door had been cut by a normal saw that ripped with numerous sharp claws and more like it had been torn at by numerous fingers.

Hamazura grabbed a nearby ornamental parasol, but he didn't carelessly throw it.

The three Edge Bees did not wait. They may have been intending to defeat Hamazura first because he was actually attacking, because the killer disks aimed for him and attacked.

Hamazura restrained his faltering heart and just barely managed to rush forward.

The Edge Bees moved much faster than he had imagined from when they were just hovering. It was nowhere near the speed of the lamp one had thrown, but it was faster than a rock thrown in a sling.

They were moving fast enough that he would probably need an ambulance if one hit him and that wasn't even taking their special chainsaws into account. If one directly hit him, his flesh would be torn to pieces and the possibility that he would be chopped in two couldn't be denied.

It was important how they had cut through the door when they entered.

The issue wasn't with how clean a cut they had made.

The issue was that they had taken time to do it.

That meant...

(Whether they hit the wall or have something in their chainsaws, they don't lose their balance in midair. They must use gyros, image analysis, ultrasonic waves, or something to help ensure their position.)

It was possible he wouldn't even be able to take one out if he threw the parasol he was holding at them. And it was possible they would slightly evade it or even throw it back.

However...

As long as they had their contra-rotating propellers, they still had a weakness.

(No matter how high performance they are, they have to fall if the propellers stop moving!!)

"Hamazura! Watch out!!" yelled Fremea from the exit.

The Edge Bees simultaneously attacked Hamazura from three different directions

Just before one of the quickly rotating blades reached him, he ducked down.

That wasn't enough to avoid the Edge Bee.

However, before they could correct their trajectories, he stuck the end of the parasol up the middle of the Edge Bees as if he was stabbing it.

He was attempting to obstruct the two propellers rotating in opposite directions.

The horrible noise of the parasol's metal frame shattering could be heard. However, the Edge Bee wasn't unharmed. Orange sparks shot out, the propellers broke, and, most importantly, it stopped moving. The sudden obstruction of movement had a negative effect on the motor and gears inside.

The Edge Bee flew to the floor without having its momentum stopped.

The machine bounced and struck one of the other Edge Bees coming in to attack Hamazura from a different direction. The propeller had stopped, but the chainsaw was still functioning. The two Edge Bees' blades caught each other and the two machines flew into different corners of the room like billiards balls.

Hamazura used the opening this created to run towards the exit where Fremea waited.

The final remaining machine aimed for his back, but he stuck his foot under the door that was lying on the ground and forcefully kicked it up. He grabbed the side with both hands, turned around, and swung it full force.

He swung it down.

He wasn't just trying to swat the machine down with brute strength.

As had been previously established, the Edge Bees used their contra-rotating propellers for lift and propulsion. That meant that they couldn't fly if the artificial wind they blew down was obstructed.

This could be accomplished by blocking it with a giant board over the propellers.

After knocking the last one to the ground, Hamazura jumped up on the door covering the Edge Bee. He jumped up and down a couple of times using all of his weight to smash the collection of delicate machinery underneath.

Of course, military weapons were built to be tough, but, if the delicate propellers were bent even slightly, that was enough to deprive it of lift.

"Okay, now..."

“Hurry!! Hamazura, run!!”

He ran out of the room and met up with Fremea.

That was when the sound of a chainsaw came to his ears.

When he looked back in the room, he saw the first Edge Bee with the destroyed propellers getting up from the corner of the room it had been knocked to. The outer edge of the disk was pushed up against the floor and it was keeping its balance.

The Edge Bee then started rolling towards Hamazura using the chainsaw as a tire. It moved with tremendous speed.

(Shit!! What kind of position maintenance systems does that thing have?!)

Hamazura stepped back out of instinctual fear, but he hit the corridor wall. The impact on his back caused his feet to slip from the floor and he fell on his ass.

That was when yet another threat attacked.

The wall to his back was sliced diagonally.

A spear that appeared to be made of compressed air and was around 3 meters long appeared. It sliced through the wall and destroyed the advancing Edge Bee as well as the floor around it.

However, this did not make Hamazura happy.

That attack had only helped him because he had happened to fall on his ass. If he had still been standing, it definitely would have sliced right through his chest.

“Hamazura, no!! The wall is collapsing!!”

“Aaaahhhhh!?”

He hurriedly rolled to the side at about the same time as the wall collapsed into the corridor.

A single figure appeared on the other side of the dust.

The transparent spears in the figure’s hands blew the dust away.

“Tch. Silver Cross, make sure you match your actions to mine. That was an unnecessary cost.”

The figure was a girl of about 12, but Hamazura felt a kind of slime within her at first glance. She had the atmosphere of someone used to killing and mayhem. She smelled of the darkness and didn't try to hide it. She was a different type from Hamazura or Hanzou. She was an outstanding darkness.

Hamazura stood up breathing erratically.

The spears coming from her hands that allowed her to easily damage the walls or floor with a slight shake of her hand looked familiar to him.

"That power..."

"Oh. It's Bomber Lance, a spear made of nitrogen. Does it look like the power of a friend of yours?" The girl smiled thinly as she swung the spear lightly and sliced the nearby wall further. "It's more or less the same as an APFSDS, one of the types of shells Silver Cross's Enemy Blaster uses with its smoothbore gun. It cuts objects using enormous pressure. There's something to think about."

The girl's words lacked any tension or even hostility.

And yet her spears held overwhelming destructive force.

"Is this really any time to be focusing on me? There are still more than 30 of Silver Cross's Edge Bees flying around. Or do you not mind if that brat is nothing but a hunk of meat next time you see her?"

"!? Fremea, escape through the north emergency staircase!!"

"...Hmm."

The Bomber Lance girl turned her head halfheartedly and spotted the small blonde doll of a girl hiding behind a pillar.

"Thanks for telling me where she was. I had thought you two had split up once she had gotten out of the room."

(...It's just like when they purposefully let Hanzou go so they could find this place...!!)

"Just go, Fremea!!"

Hamazura put the fact that he was up against a 12 year old girl out of his mind.

He jumped straight up.

He grabbed onto the edge of the fire shutter as if he was going in for a slam dunk. He put all his weight onto the shutter to force it down.

It headed down for the girl's head like a guillotine.

She looked up at him.

The metal shutter burst apart like a sponge packed full of gunpowder.

It was due to Bomber Lance.

Just by lifting her hand up, she had destroyed the thick blunt weapon. The spear itself didn't directly hit him, but metal fragments flew off and struck Hamazura's body knocking him back.

"Ghah!!"

(No good. This isn't someone I can face without a proper weapon!!)

"Hamazura!!"

"Go, Fremea!! Hurry!!"

Fremea tried to run over to Hamazura, but her shoulders shrunk down at his shout. She hesitated in the middle of the corridor, but she finally turned her back to him and ran for the emergency staircase.

Seeing that, the Bomber Lance girl gave a concise comment.

"Silver Cross."

"!!"

Hamazura immediately tried to jump at the girl, but she coldly swung her arm multiple times before he could.

With just that, the corridor's floor was cut into a block and fell to the floor below. The opening prevented Hamazura from approaching like a cliff.

Doing that hadn't been necessary.

With that much destructive force, the girl could kill Hamazura by directly aiming for him and then focus on finding Fremea.

She was clearly playing with him.

"I suppose I'll chase after her for now. If I don't find her, I'll switch to a scream tactic. Watching you flounder sounds more fun than just killing you."

“Dammit!!” Hamazura cursed and the girl turned her back on him.

He had to take a detour in order to meet up with Fremea and he needed a more powerful weapon in order to face the Edge Bees and the Bomber Lance girl.

Part 6

Every street of every district had blank spaces.

A powered suit was in a square area in the sea of buildings that was District 3. It was an area where a building had been demolished and nothing else had been built. Maintaining an old building cost money, but the owner must have wanted to keep just the land until the land’s value changed so he could make a profit off of it.

The powered suit Silver Cross was in this time had a giant sensor dome for a head, 2 arms, and 2 legs. Its appearance was rather subdued for his tastes.

However, there were 12 metal poles extending from its back. There were over 10 Edge Bees stored on those poles. Ten of the machines fit on a single pole, so the suit would have been able to hold over 100 of them in total. Over half of those were away from the suit.

The metal poles were both the Edge Bees’ hive and high precision antennas.

The powered suit was a reconnaissance suit that specialized in gathering information.

Even then, it was receiving video information from the many Edge Bees, intercepting the signals from cleaning robots and security robots, and cables stretching from within the armored suit were directly gathering information from the underground communications network.

His objective was clear.

“Now then. I think I’ve cut off all their escape routes.”

Of course, the plan had been to capture Fremea Seivelun inside the private salon, but he had deployed Edge Bees around the building and was acquiring information from nearby security cameras to defend against the small possibility that she would get away.

From the size of the building and the number of customers using it, he had expected to cause quite a panic, but he wasn’t about to miss his target’s face among all the people.

(Either Kuroyoru will catch her first or it'll fall to me. Either way, this is the end for Fremea Seivelun.)

Because Hamazura Shiage was in the building, the possibility of Item showing up came to mind, but that would just mean it was time for his overwhelming but easy-to-understand "power".

(Maybe I should switch from a reconnaissance suit like Bee Launcher into a battle suit.)

The owner of the powered suits didn't get fixated on a single suit.

His motto was that not insisting on sticking with a single weapon and choosing the one that was most suitable for the situation was the most effective course of action. As such, he saw no meaning in arguing over what weapon was strongest and he didn't blindly believe that a certain weapon could do anything.

(No, if the target moves during that time, I'll lose sight of her. That would be getting my priorities backwards. If I did that...)

As he thought, the powered suit trembled slightly.

He had picked up on a threat via the great number of Edge Bees deployed out in the city using the reconnaissance suit. He noticed his thoughts accelerating. In other words, he was panicking and he couldn't stop it.

(This is bad.)

This was someone who was completely unaffected by direct "power" and that was what he specialized in.

Normally, this would be something Kuroyoru Umidori would handle.

(Item is nothing compared to this. My methods are just too incompatible!!)

Part 7

Hamazura Shiage was running down the southern emergency staircase.

He was still split up from Fremea.

He needed a weapon to save her and the private salons were used by rich boys and girls in the upper echelons of society who lived in a different environment from him. As such, the building offered services that seemed a bit odd to him.

Like an indoor shooting range.

Of course, they didn't have a collection of real handguns and hunting rifles there. However, they did have a variety of projectile weapons that didn't violate Academy City regulations. They had crossbows, longbows, blowguns, and bolt action rifles that fired rubber bullets.

Hamazura looked at the sign on the wall and ran out of the emergency staircase and into the corridor of his target floor. Unlike the other floors, this one was not lined with evenly spaced doors like in a hotel or a karaoke box. The large floor was split by corridors in a cross shape making 4 large rooms. The 4 rooms contained a bowling alley, an indoor shooting range, and other such facilities.

However, Hamazura was not able to arrive at the shooting range so easily. An Edge Bee appeared in the corridor in front of him.

He just had to hurry up and get in the shooting range.

He just had to obtain a proper weapon and fight back.

But Hamazura's mind had passed its limit.

A large shiver came over his entire body and he couldn't stop trembling afterwards.

"Ahhh... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!"

The disappearance of the immediate need to put up a strong face in having to protect Fremea who was weaker than him had helped him reach this point.

He felt a full-on fear of death. He saw an image of his flesh and bones being ripped and torn by the crude chainsaw. Hamazura lost strength in his limbs and his thoughts were thrown into chaos.

Despite what he had experienced, despite how clever he could be, and despite the fact that he had been on the front line during World War III, deep down he was still a high school student from Japan's Academy City.

He wasn't a professional soldier who had been trained to kill for years.

With no foundation to rely on, it would have been odd if he hadn't felt fear with true danger staring him in the face.

(Why...?)

It was taking all of Hamazura's strength just to remain standing.

(Why? Why does this shit always happen to me!? The war is over. These kinds of tools aren't needed anymore!! What could possibly make someone aim one of these things at a flesh-and-blood human!?)

However, the Edge Bee did not wait.

It plunged straight towards Hamazura in order to slice his body in two.

Hamazura immediately grabbed a nearby fire extinguisher.

"Ooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He swung it horizontally.

The fire extinguisher struck the chainsaw and exploded. All the gas leaked out through a different spot than it was supposed to which caused the metal remains to shoot off like a rocket leaving white powder behind. It stuck into the ceiling.

However, the Edge Bee was knocked away.

It had struck the fire extinguisher while its chainsaw was still in "cut" mode and some of its own power may have sent it flying off. Its position maintaining system used image processing, so the powder from the fire extinguisher may have lowered its ability to determine which way was up.

The Edge Bee tried to regain control, but it struck the wall. More specifically, the pole of a decorative flag diagonally sticking out of the wall pierced through the shampoo hat-like contra-rotating propellers. The propeller blades it needed to move broke and a further cracking noise could be heard from within the machine. Hamazura looked at the Edge Bee hanging on the wall like a hat and gulped.

(I did it...?)

That was when the LED next to the Edge Bee's camera changed color with a beep.

"Fuck!!"

Hamazura's face paled. He opened the door to the shooting range and jumped in.

Immediately afterwards, there was an explosion.

The noise put great pressure on his eardrums. Also, it wasn't just the blast that spread out. A sharp pain ran up Hamazura's arm. Tearing through his sleeve and into his arm was the kind of fishing hook that was often used for lures. It was made of three J-shaped hooks.

There had been explosives and hundreds of fishing hooks inside the Edge Bee. It wasn't unusual for nails or metal balls to be put inside to increase the damage done, but using fishing hooks was just cruel.

This was because fishing hooks had a reversed area at the end making them hard to remove. And with three hooks together, it couldn't be taken out the other way either.

"~ ~ ~ !!"

Hamazura held a handkerchief in his mouth to make sure he didn't bite his tongue and then forced out the hook while holding it between his thumb and forefinger. A pain that felt like the tip of the hook was tearing directly at his nerves ran up his entire arm and sweat covered his face.

(This isn't normal...)

He wrapped the handkerchief around his wounded arm and unsteadily walked over to the shooting range's counter. A great number of projectile weapons were set up behind it. Normally, an employee would be managing them, but there was no one at the counter due to the uproar.

(Their cruelty isn't like the darkness I've seen before. They aren't thinking about what will be advantageous to them and maintaining their power. They're thinking about what will make us suffer and deploying everything they have...)

He climbed over the counter and looked at the lined up weapons.

He wanted to arm himself with as many weapons as he could, but all of them were over a meter long. Either a certain size was necessary to be powerful and yet not be against the regulations or large weapons were popular among the customers. Either way, he could only really carry around one of them.

He wanted the strongest on there, but he also wanted something an amateur like him could use.

After a short period of indecision he finally chose...

(...An electrically assisted blowgun.)

The blowgun was about 110 cm long and had been improved for sports use. It was made of the same type of plastic used in knives and airplanes.

Normally, a blowgun didn't have enough power to injure or kill someone. It used an arrow that was no more than a needle and used the human lungs to propel that arrow.

Certain tribes could capture large beasts with them, but that was due to poison on the arrows instead of the destructive power of the projectile itself.

However, this one was electrically assisted.

When someone blew into the pipe, sensors picked up on it and sent out a blast of compressed air created with a compressor. Forcing the human to blow into it when it could easily be left completely to the machine must have been a method to get around the Academy City regulations. The arrow was propelled by the breath amplified dozens of times, so it could pierce through a piece of plywood a couple of centimeters thick.

A laser pointer was used to help aim, so aiming was fairly easy.

Hamazura grabbed an entire box of the arrows that were stabilized with tails much like darts.

The weapon had not stopped his trembling.

His determination to carry the weapon had brought strength back to him.

(This doesn't guarantee I can defeat those Edge Bees and I'm not even sure I can scratch that Bomber Lance esper with it. Even so, having it makes a big difference. At the very least, I can use it to allow Fremea to escape!!)

That was when he heard a clattering noise.

He immediately crouched behind the counter while he opened up an area about 40 cm from the hole to blow in and put in an arrow. But then his hand stopped moving. The noise hadn't been caused by an Edge Bee or an unknown esper.

It had been caused by a middle-aged man.

He was wearing a worn-out suit and his tie was crooked. Sweat caused by tension and fear was soaking his face and his dress shirt.

Hamazura stood up from behind the counter and spoke.

"...You don't look like an employee. Are you a customer?"

Academy City was a special city with 80% of its residents being students, but that still meant that 20% of its residents were adults. Hamazura didn't know whether an adult would want to rent a "secret hideout", but there was no reason they couldn't use the private salons.

Hamazura grabbed a longbow from behind the counter and threw it towards the middle-aged man.

“If you don’t want to die, you should get out of here. They can destroy doors and walls and they’re searching through every single room. They may not be after you, but you’ll still get attacked if you stay here. And those killer chainsaws seem to have explosives inside of them. You should get the hell out of here if you can.”

“...”

The man slowly reached his hand over to the longbow. It looked more like he was just picking up something that had been thrown in front of him than like he was prepared to fight. Frankly speaking, there was no independence in his action.

The man’s gaze slowly moved from the longbow to Hamazura.

“...Wh-what are you going to do?” the man asked.

“Run away, of course. This place isn’t right. There are killer chainsaws flying all over the place and some even more dangerous esper kid is swinging around spears that look like they can slice through steel. If I stay here, I’m sure to be killed, so I’m going to run away even if it’s pathetic.”

Hamazura pulled some arrows for the blowgun and stuck them behind his belt.

He was rushing and his hands were shaking, but he didn’t have time to allow himself to relax.

“But before I do, I have to rescue a girl called Fremea. I don’t think I can win in a fight against that monster, but I at least have to help that girl escape safely.”

“Why?” The man shook his head like a child. “With an uproar like this, Anti-Skill is sure to come. Even if they’re searching through every single room, this building must have hundreds of rooms! If we stay here, they’ll use up all their time. Someone will come to save us in that time!! Moving around isn’t going to save us; hiding here is!!”

“That may be true.”

That assumed Anti-Skill had the power to resolve the situation.

And it assumed the enemy wouldn’t use their dozens of flying cameras effectively.

And it assumed the enemy would respond to failure by letting them go home instead of with an explosion of anger.

“But it may not be true. And, as I said before, I have to let Fremea escape this building. She’s only around 10 years old. She’ll clearly die more easily than us. There’s no guarantee she’ll have the support to live on. I can’t leave her alone. If I do, I’m letting death rush towards her. So I need to draw that death away from her as much as I can.”

“...Why...?” muttered the man again.

Hamazura wasn’t pressuring the man to help.

“Sorry. I’m not telling you to come along. It’s your life. You should decide what to do with it. But, if you decide to hide, you should find somewhere else. When I came here, I destroyed an Edge Bee. A replacement might come, so you need to at least go to a different room.”

“No. Not that.”

The man shook his head repeatedly.

Hamazura realized the man was shaking due to something more than just fear.

“How can you think about the things around you in a situation like this...?” The man was muttering, but then his voice grew louder. “I came here looking for my daughter who ran away from home. I don’t know the details, but she was trying to resolve a dangerous situation where she couldn’t rely on Anti-Skill or Judgment. She didn’t want to get the rest of the family wrapped up in it, so she was using a private salon as a secret hideout. I desperately searched to figure this much out. I was prepared to do anything. I worked so hard determined to bring my daughter back before she was caught up in trouble that she couldn’t come back from.”

He spoke as if he were about to vomit up blood.

“But my real self was different. When I was faced with danger, it all broke away. I could only think about myself. After that, I can’t imagine that I could use this bow for my daughter’s sake! No matter what is in my hands, I can only imagine that I would think only of how I could use it to save myself!! ...How can I become like you? It isn’t so simple. When my real self saw what was going on, I couldn’t think about anything around me!!”

That was an inevitable fear that came from life.

That was distorted thinking meant to avoid that fear.

That defeated man had tasted the depths of the earth with his heart’s tongue and he now sat there silently trembling.

“...What are you saying?”

But Hamazura Shiage’s face did not display an expression of contempt.

“You used your own power to get a wife, created a proper household, and frantically worked to protect all that. You had enough money for your daughter to use a private salon daily, because you worked for your family. You didn’t just get on the rails and amass it all solely because everyone around you was. When your daughter disappeared and your household seemed like it was falling apart, you acted to save your family even if it was breaking your own rules.”

Those were not words of comfort.

They were not soft words intended to not hurt.

“Everyone has things I don’t. No matter how much I struggle, I just can’t obtain them and yet I still have a final goal that I want to grab no matter what.”

Longing.

Because of his genuine longing, Hamazura bared his heart here.

“Be proud, hero. You are what I long to be.”

The middle-aged man looked down and remained silent for a short while.

He reflected on what Hamazura had said.

Finally, he stopped his body’s trembling. That once-defeated man raised his head and spoke.

“...I’ll go, too. Doing nothing isn’t going to help this situation.”

“Are you really okay with that?”

“Just like you have to let that Fremea girl get away, I have to save my daughter.”

“Do you know where your daughter is amid all this chaos?”

“She’s a lot like me. She most likely hasn’t moved around and I know what room she was in, so I’m going to head there.”

“I see,” muttered Hamazura.

He picked up the blowgun again.

“Then I’ll draw the attention of the Edge Bees as much as I can. If you know where you’re headed, it’s simple. You just run there.”

“Draw their attention...? Do you know what you’re saying!? Even with a weapon, you aren’t invincible. If a bunch of them fly at you at once...!!”

“It’s my fault,” Hamazura said cutting the man off. “This chaos, the swarm of Edge Bees, and the strange esper destroying walls are all here because of me. I’m not strong enough to resolve it all. I can only do so much. But let me do it. I can only do so much, but let me do what I can!!”

Hearing no restraining voice, Hamazura left the indoor shooting range and walked out into the corridor.

At the exact same time, the Bomber Lance girl destroyed a different wall and came through.

“Just meet up with Fremea already, so you lead me to her.”

“...!!”

“Or should we do the opposite? If I made you scream so loudly it could be heard throughout the building, would she come here or get scared and run away?”

There was no need to listen to her words.

He had a weapon now.

Hamazura held the blowgun up with both hands and centered the red dot from the laser pointer on the girl’s body. He then blew as hard as he could into it. The electronic compressor amplified the power of his breath dozens of times.

A thick noise rang out.

It wasn’t the sound of it being fired. Just like with bows, the sound of the blow landing was much louder than the sound of it being fired. However, it wasn’t the sound of the esper’s flesh being ripped either. Nor was it the sound of it being reflected with her power. The girl had twisted her body slightly and the dart-shaped arrow had hit the corridor wall behind her.

Her expression remained calm.

But Hamazura had learned something.

She had dodged the arrow instead of repelling it. That meant she had determined that she would have been damaged had it hit her. She had decided she couldn’t block it, so she had avoided it. That esper could only create spears of nitrogen. She couldn’t create an unbreakable wall in every direction around her.

In other words...

(I can win this if I hit her!!)

In order to fire a second shot, Hamazura opened an area 40 cm from the hole to blow in and put in one of the arrows from his belt.

Then the Bomber Lance girl made her move.

She created spears from both hands and moved at high speed towards Hamazura while slicing up the walls on the left and right half for fun.

(Shit, can I shoot in time!?)

Before the girl could get to him, Hamazura finished reloading and closed the open part of the blowgun.

But by the time he had raised it up, the girl was in killing range.

She got rid of the spear coming from one hand and covered the end of the blowgun with the same hand.

“How about I blow through the wrong end?”

“!?”

Hamazura immediately let go of the blowgun and swung his head forcefully to the side.

Immediately afterwards, a spear of nitrogen appeared and pierced straight through the inside of the blowgun. Along with an explosive blast from the destroyed blowgun, the spear grazed Hamazura’s cheek. Sharp plastic fragments gave him light scratches.

The shock knocked him down.

On the ground, Hamazura pulled a dart-shaped arrow from his belt. He had intended on throwing it back at her, but the girl stepped on his arm before he could.

“Gah!?”

Her small foot came down on the area between his wrist and elbow, pinning it to the ground.

Then she held her palm down towards his chest. The very same palm that could create a deadly spear.

“Fremea Seivelun,” she said bluntly. “Should I try having you call her here with a scream as planned?”

But then...

“Kuroyoru.” The girl didn’t seem to have a cell phone, but a staticky voice came from her pocket. “We have a problem. Break off and get outside. I’ll take over inside the building.”

“Has Item come?”

“No. It’s much worse. My brute force will be no help in dealing with this problem. And dealing with him was supposed to be left to you.”

“I see.” The girl removed her foot from Hamazura’s arm. “Excellent timing. I was just getting into too good a tempo.”

“Gh...”

Hamazura put a hand on the wall and desperately tried to stand up so he could stop her.

However, the girl did something he hadn’t expected.

She sliced a nearby wall with a spear, walked through it, and then broke through a thick window with a tackle.

With the high-pitched noise of the window shattering, her small body was thrown out through the window. The floor they were on was quite high up.

However, she did not fall.

She spread her hands out horizontally and the spears of nitrogen coming from them held her in place. Her spears didn’t just have destructive power. She was manipulating the air currents with them to create swirling currents on her back.

“You mentioned Item.” Hamazura dragged his hurting body over and desperately questioned the girl who was stopped in midair. “Answer me. And not just about Fremea. Are you planning on doing something to them?”

“Don’t be in such a rush. Whether you want to or not, you’ll know soon enough.”

After saying that, the girl stopped emitting the spears and fell straight down with her back to the ground. Of course, she was intending on landing, not on crashing. She was most likely going to stop herself with the spears again near the ground.

“Dammit...”

Hamazura thought for a bit and then headed for the emergency staircase.

It seemed the Bomber Lance girl had temporarily withdrawn, but there were still tons of Edge Bees wandering around the building.

Part 8

Kuroyoru Umidori landed on the ground.

The uproar inside the private salon building had led to a lot of people pouring out of the building and a lot of onlookers gathering around the building, so there were quite a few people in the area.

As part of the dark side of the city, she was unconcerned with that uproar.

Her expression was calm. A student playing a game on his cell phone out of boredom would have had a more serious expression on his face.

“Tch. Silver Cross. You said they had problematic reinforcements, but where?”

She looked around, but didn’t see anyone like that.

The only people out of the ordinary she saw were some of her subordinates who caught sight of her and moved in tentatively to protect her.

Kuroyoru sat down in a seat at a nearby open café, set her plastic dolphin doll down in an empty seat at the round 4-person table, and ordered what seemed to be the café’s recommended black tea.

She brought the teacup that was given to her to her lips.

(...I’m sure someone somewhere is at their wits’ end over this. Well, doing things in such a showy way is perfect for having the roots meet.)

Of course, the residents of the city saw the swarm of Edge Bees flying through the sky and the private salons being attacked. But no one actually did anything to stop the crime. Even if it seemed odd, they just couldn’t keep up with the ever changing situation.

They lived in a different world.

The darkness couldn’t function as the darkness if it wasn’t stronger than the surface.

(Now then, I have to make sure no reinforcements get in the way until Silver Cross’s Edge Bees corner Fremea Seivelun. I wish he would have at least told me where the bastard I most need to stop was.)

That was when she heard a footstep.

A wicked grin appeared on Kuroyoru Umidori’s lips.

She could smell it. This was the smell of someone who wasn't on the level. This was the smell of someone who was trying to mix in with the people passing by and clearly failing. Simply put, this was the smell put off only by people who were soaked with darkness.

"Oh?" Kuroyoru said at about the same time as a piece of paper slipped onto the table.

A single photograph now accompanied the seemingly popular tea on the table.

The photograph was of Fremea Seivelun.

"...Apparently that report about you being here was accurate. You weren't actually supposed to show up until a bit later," Kuroyoru called out to the other side of the table with a grin on her face.

She was addressing a Level 5.

"Dammit, and the #4 would have been so much simpler."

Yes.

It was the #1, Accelerator.

♦

Accelerator had tossed the photo of Fremea onto the table and watched the girl's reaction.

He had made it nearby from the marked map and by referencing some more information, but the biggest factor had been the explosion and the many unmanned reconnaissance devices. If he hadn't been passing through that area, he probably would have headed for the building or the origin point of the unmanned reconnaissance devices.

It had been a coincidence that he had stopped and looked over at the open café.

The girl had been incredibly easy to spot.

All Accelerator had to do was notice the idiot who stank of darkness and was relaxing with a number of subordinates blending into the surrounding area.

"How about you take a seat?" asked the girl with a thin smile and a dangerous look in her eyes. "This is the café's recommended tea. It's called...nnn...I don't remember. It was a pretty long name. Anyway, how about you try some? Although it isn't very good."

Accelerator sat in the seat opposite the girl and ordered a different type of tea from the recommended one.

It wasn't any good either.

"...I guess there was no avoiding it."

"That's life for you."

"And who are you?"

"Do you really think I'm going to introduce myself?"

"You're Kuroyoru Umidori."

"...Tch. You were just asking to verify it."

She looked around and noticed 2 or 3 of her subordinates were missing. They weren't important enough to her to remember their names or what they looked like, but it seemed they had been dragged off somewhere.

In their place, a woman wearing an aodai and with a cast on one arm waved at her. There was nothing but scorn in the woman's smile.

(An incredibly simple trick, but it's admirable that they managed to pull it off without me noticing.)

Kuroyoru gave up and spoke.

"Correct. ...Did you chop off a few fingers?"

"We threw him in an automated kitchen waste disposal device in an alley and asked whether he wanted to talk or be turned to fertilizer."

"Eh? That's all it took to get him to talk? I guess *I* need to cut off a few of his fingers then."

"But it wasn't enough," Accelerator said as if he were cutting her off. "We didn't get much information. Really all we got was your name, Silver Cross's name, and the term 'Freshmen'. ...Oh, and given how much ridiculous pride he had in this Freshmen thing, it must be pretty important. He told us your names, but he wouldn't say anything about that."

"...Maybe I need to cut off his legs as well as all of his fingers," was Kuroyoru's disturbing comment as she puffed up her cheeks.

She used her hand to stroke the plastic dolphin doll in the seat next to her in what may have been a way of letting out some of her stress.

“So what are you doing here?”

“That’s my question,” spat out Accelerator. “The darkness should be gone. I eliminated it. I abolished the structure that bound the city’s dark organizations together. At the end of that annoying war, I made it happen. I had the people being used by the upper levels released. So why are people so obviously part of all that like you doing here?”

At the end of World War III, he had said this to a messenger of the upper levels:

Don’t send out any more orders to use that brat or the Sisters as shields. Freeze the Third Season program. Don’t play with their lives for your own purposes, be it about killing them or making more of them.

And:

Release everyone else in a similar situation to mine. I won’t let you use anyone or anything as a shield to force people to do your dirty work in the world of darkness. If I catch even one instance, I’ll bare my fangs towards you. I will brutally crush you as many times as it takes.

“True enough.” Kuroyoru brought her cup to her mouth and smelled the tea, smelled it again, smelled it yet again, and then looked puzzled at her inability to tell the difference from normal teas. “There was a notification. All the hostages and conditions functioning as chains were done away with. Maybe there were even some people that celebrated. Although the whole thing felt less like it was due to the higher ups being afraid of you and more like it was them rewarding you for carrying out your proper role in the war. I guess your achievements in the war made up for your debt.”

“…”

“There was something I wanted to ask you if I ever met you. I had actually completely forgotten about it, but I remembered it when I saw your face. So I guess I’ll ask you now.”

Kuroyoru closed her eyes with her cup still in her hand.

Then she opened them.

And she spoke.

“...Do you really fucking think everyone in the world can just get along?”

Immediately afterwards, the table was sliced in half with an explosive noise.

Accelerator swung his head to the side slightly.

The cup near his mouth had been sliced in two just like the table and the liquid inside was flying through the air.

He was Academy City's strongest esper, but he had a weakness in his inability to use his power if he didn't hit the switch on the choker-style electrode on his neck.

So he dodged the first strike.

He didn't need to for the second strike.

As he used his empty hand to hit the switch on his neck, the cheap-looking black tea hit his upper body and was repelled. There were no burns left on his skin. And Kuroyoru's second attack met the same fate.

Namely, it was reflected.

Kuroyoru forcefully stood up knocking her chair backwards and twisted her entire body to the side just barely managing to avoid her own attack. The cup in her hand was sliced. Only the handle remained in her hand and she threw it to the ground. In its place, she grabbed the plastic dolphin doll.

With the tea, the table, and his opponent's seat gone, Accelerator sat comfortably in the sole remaining chair.

"...That manner of speaking...No, that calculation pattern..."

"Oh, so you realized it? I suppose you would, wouldn't you? It is a portion of your own pattern planted and strengthened, after all."

"The Dark May Project."

Accelerator gave a scornful laugh.

That was one of the inhuman projects that had been carried out in the dark portions of Academy City. They had analyzed the city's strongest Level 5s thought patterns and forcibly inserted a portion of it into others. In exchange for a bit of stability in their personalities, those people had received a rapid increase in the strength of their powers.

"You're just some little kid with a portion forcibly planted inside you and I'm the real deal. Are you really so god damn stupid you can't figure out who's stronger without actually going through with it?"

"Maybe I am, you fucking brat."

“This is a trigger.” Accelerator tapped his chair’s armrest with his index finger. “If I stand up from here, you’re dead. Do you really want to make me stand up?”

“It’s true that I don’t have much of a chance in a straight-on fight. That’s why I was putting off dealing with you. However,” Kuroyoru added, “terms of victory here aren’t those of a straight-on fight.”

“…”

“Your power is great for destroying, but it’s not so great for protecting, right? It’s the same for me!!”

As she yelled, Kuroyoru horizontally swung the hand of the arm without a plastic dolphin doll under it.

She swung it towards the people watching the sudden turmoil from a distance.

She used the power that had sliced a table in half in the direction of flesh-and-blood humans.

At the same instant, Accelerator jumped up from his chair.

The attack was similar to wind.

Accelerator got in between Kuroyoru and the onlookers and immediately scattered the attack that was also much like a spear or an arrow.

“That was a trigger.” He struck her chest with his bullet-like words. “And you pulled it. Now accept your fate.”

Kuroyoru Umidori smiled.

Pieces of the tables and road surface she had blown away were flying through the air. She pointed towards a photograph floating amid it all that had been sliced in half.

“She’s here.”

“Who is?”

“Fremea Seivelun.”

Academy City’s strongest monster’s eyebrows twitched ever so slightly.

“Let’s have some fun, #1.”

“…”

“That brat is nearby. Let’s play a game. If I can chop off her head like in that photo, I win.”

And then...

Part 9

Hamazura Shiage ran out of the private salon building.

Things had been crazy inside the building. It had been a hell of multiple Edge Bees destroying and flying through windows and doors whenever he let his guard down, but he had still managed to make his way out.

As long as you didn’t falter at the sight of the chainsaws around the disks, there were a number of ways to deal with them. You could throw a spray can into the shampoo-hat like propellers, you could smash their camera lenses with a fire extinguisher, and you could stick a lit cigarette near their batteries and then hit them with a bottle of whiskey.

The Edge Bees could catch objects, accelerate them with centrifugal force, and throw them, but that could be dealt with by throwing things at them from angles the chainsaw couldn’t reach or using bottles that would break when “grabbed”.

He was lucky that they only self-destructed when they stopped functioning in any other way. If they detonated at any opportune time, Hamazura wouldn’t have been able to even approach them.

(Where’s Fremea!? Is she outside already? Or is she still inside!?)

Hamazura pushed through the onlookers who had gathered after hearing the uproar and searched around the area for the girl, but he then got an odd uncomfortable feeling.

Something was off.

It didn’t make sense.

It had been complete luck that he had been able to make his way through the large swarm of Edge Bees and outside. It wasn’t that he hadn’t wanted to make it outside. He had been fighting desperately hoping to do just that.

But...

He honestly felt that it had been too easy.

Even if he did have a motley collection of experiences, Hamazura was still just a delinquent boy. He couldn't use the kind of special power that was needed to get through this kind of situation. These were killer weapons; they were specifically designed to kill people and getting killed was the obvious result of running into one. There was no way he should have gotten past them.

One or two could maybe fall under the category of a miracle.

But Hamazura had run into more than 10 Edge Bees and there had to be a lot more of them spread out throughout the building.

How had he survived?

Was it just a coincidence?

Or had someone purposefully intervened to make it happen?

"Fremea!! Are you there!?"

But he didn't have time to think too deeply about it.

He had only managed to escape from the swarm of Edge Bees. They hadn't been destroyed. Not to mention that they were only unmanned reconnaissance devices. If his conjecture was correct, the true threat behind them was much worse than the esper girl or the powered suit he had seen before.

That was when Hamazura heard a familiar girls' voice as he looked around the area.

"...In the first place...!! Over here, Hamazura...come...!!"

"Fremea!!"

He franticly turned around, but there were simply too many onlookers. It didn't help that Fremea was fairly short. She may have been completely hidden behind all the people.

He couldn't find her.

He couldn't meet up with her.

His panic grew causing his ability to find someone amid all that confusion to fall.

And as he moved about in confusion, the next disaster came.

With a great noise, a giant powered suit appeared kicking a car away in the parking lot.

The suit looked very alien in the cityscape. That out-of-place feeling led to Hamazura picking up the same scent from it as the one in the underground mall despite him having no proof.

It had 2 arms and 2 legs.

Compared to the 8-legged one carrying a smoothbore gun, this one had a very subdued design, but it was still just too huge. A person's arms and legs simply couldn't be in the analogous parts of the suit. There had to be a space opened in the body. It had a number of narrow pillars on its back that held Edge Bees on them.

The onlookers stared blankly at it.

They knew that Academy City could create things like that suit, but they didn't often have a chance to see one with their own eyes.

On the other hand, the powered suit did not hesitate.

It did not care that there were witnesses.

The giant suit headed straight for its target paying the onlookers no heed.

In other words, it headed to crush Fremea Seivelun.

"...!!!???"

A number of screams, both male and female, rang out.

Ignoring the panicked people attempting to escape, the suit headed straight on.

Hamazura couldn't move.

For one, he still didn't know exactly where Fremea was. But the bigger factor was that, unlike with the Edge Bees, the overwhelming and chilling negative feelings that came over him penetrated his skin and caused it to tighten up so he couldn't move.

This was the killer intent of a living being.

A mere machine could not emit this.

While Hamazura was completely frozen up, the powered suit knocked a car in the parking lot into the air. It made three flips in midair before heading back towards the ground.

Hamazura looked in horror at the spot it was headed for.

Fremea Seivelun was there.

She must have been knocked down while the other onlookers tried to escape. She was collapsed face down on the road. Near her was an abandoned stroller. Either the parent had panicked and ran off or the stroller had been separated from the parent in the confusion. In the stroller was a baby young enough that it was difficult to tell if it was a boy or a girl.

Hamazura finally managed to free his legs from the fear. He started running in Fremea's direction.

But it was too late.

He yelled at her to run.

Fremea looked back and forth between the car approaching from above and the stroller.

That slight hesitation brought her tiny odds of survival straight down to zero.

The car fell.

The baby in the stroller must not have understood the situation. It stretched its innocent little hands up towards the side mirror that was reflecting sunlight as the car spun through the air.

Immediately afterwards, a sound of destruction could be heard.

Momentum, heat, electricity. The sound was caused by the boy who could control all these vectors, Accelerator, when he knocked the car horizontally with a flying kick.

Accelerator had shot over at tremendous speed, but he remained stationary in the air for a short second. Meanwhile, the car that had received all the energy from his movement was knocked away accurately in a direction with no onlookers. Like in billiards, the momentum had been transferred.

Accelerator almost floated down and landed lightly near Fremea.

The loud noise must have finally caused the baby to think it was in danger, because it started crying loudly. Accelerator did not turn towards it.

The powered suit.

Kuroyoru Umidori.

Keeping an eye on the locations of the direct threats, Accelerator spoke.

He spoke the words as if they were words of praise and they were directed towards Fremea who had been unable to run away in the very end.

(...This is supposed to be that damn Level 0's role, not mine.)

What the monster said could be applied both to himself and the girl.

"You're just not fit to be a hero, you fucking brat."

♦

In that instant, Hamazura Shiage was bewildered.

Why had Academy City's strongest Level 5 shown up there?

Level 0s like Hamazura and Fremea were practically the polar opposite of the Level 5s who reigned from the very top of the psychic power development program. Hamazura knew it was ridiculous, but he didn't think a Level 5 would save a Level 0 in that city without a really good reason. He didn't feel that they had enough "value" to do so otherwise.

Of course, he was thankful Fremea had been saved.

The problem Hamazura had now was that the situation had passed the point where a Level 0 could get through it by coming up with a great idea.

He had met Accelerator in the areas of fiercest fighting during World War III like Russia and the Elizalina Alliance of Independent Nations. Accelerator was a person who could overpower the latest weapons of both the Russian army and Academy City barehanded. It would be immensely reassuring to have his help.

However, Hamazura remembered something unpleasant.

It was the same as when he had "luckily" escaped the swarm of Edge Bees.

(...Can I use him?)

The #1 had protected Takitsubo from terrorists in the past, but Hamazura had a bad impression of him for a different reason.

But he wasn't in a position where he could be picky.

(...Anything's fine as long it gets us out of this situation. He's the horrible person who killed Leader Komaba, but that in itself is a reason for him to fight for Fremea!!)

♦

In that instant, the powered suit received a delighted transmission from a comrade.

“Here we go! Here we gooooo!! Silver Cross!! The connection has been made. Just one more push and the line will be set!!”

“It’s possible they’ve figured out what we’re after.”

“They can’t do anything about it even if they have. That’s what the half-dead Fremea Seivelun is for! After coming this far, the flow can’t be changed. They can’t stop it!! If we use her, it’ll be set. This is checkmate, Silver Cross!!”

The sound of someone clicking their tongue resounded throughout the inside of the powered suit.

He was the kind of man that knew how to do the right thing at the right time.

“God damn it. This model isn’t suited for battle!!” he cursed and the powered suit moved forward.

The guard rail and fire hydrant in the way were knocked away as if by construction equipment.

♦

At that same time, Kuroyoru was at a distance watching Silver Cross’s giant powered suit attack.

It may have been a custom suit, but it couldn’t defeat Academy City’s #1.

(...That won’t be a problem.)

The loud noise of metal being smashed could be heard.

The powered suit had moved to pick Fremea up off the ground with its steel fingers that were tougher than heavy machinery and Accelerator had used his power to completely bend them.

The shock of the attack crept up like roots and the broken arm tore off, cracks ran across the outer shell, and great damage was done to the machinery required for the powered suit to move.

Normally, it would have been over there.

But this was different.

(...Wins and losses here aren’t determined by strength alone!!)

Silver Cross Alpha was “wearing” the thick powered suit.

That meant...

Suddenly, the front of the powered suit opened up even as the suit was being destroyed.

This allowed Silver Cross to get out.

However, it wasn't a flesh-and-blood human who came out.

It was an exceedingly small powered suit constructed from rounded armadillo-like armor.

It must have used some kind of equipment or sensors to carry out its attitude control. The armadillo kept its momentum from leaving the giant suit and rotated in midair.

It passed over Fremea upside down.

No, the armadillo actually grabbed her by the back of the neck with one hand.

Kuroyoru yelled forcefully into her radio.

"Silver Cross!! Run off with her! That'll end this!!"

Accelerator had thought it was over when he had destroyed the larger suit, so he was a little late in reacting.

The next move came.

Along with some screams, the crowd of people in the area split to the left and the right.

A powered suit had a giant propeller on its back and it slid through the gap in the crowd. It was a model meant to travel at high speeds and it could "slide" with its 4 legs at 800 kph. The end of its legs could emit a liquid known as Slip Oil that let it travel smoothly, but the highly volatile Slip Oil did not leave any hint that allowed it to be tracked.

Its movements were very monotonous, but this meant Silver Cross could have this personal suit move automatically based on a program.

A thick hatch opened on the front.

Silver Cross half-rotated once more while still holding Fremea and went inside the four-legged model.

The bank vault-like hatch closed.

The transfer was complete.

He was a man that knew how to do the right thing at the right time.

In other words, he had looked at the situation and used the model that allowed him to get away as quickly as possible.

The propeller on the back increased speed.

It created an explosive wind.

The powered suit began accelerating all at once before Accelerator had a chance to grab the armor.

His hand met only air.

By that point, the suit was already cutting through the streets like a bullet.

Kuroyoru Umidori hid her presence and mixed in with the crowd.

“We win,” she said into her transmitter.

All that was left was the crying of the baby in the stroller.

That voice was provoked by a human’s primitive emotions, but it did not reach the darkness.

Part 10

He didn’t have time.

After seeing what happened from start to finish, Hamazura Shiage grabbed a broken metal pipe—most likely a piece of the destroyed powered suit—for self-defense and ran towards Accelerator.

He would use anything he could to increase his power.

Unlike with Takitsubo, Mugino, or Kinuhata, he had no reason to not want to get that #1 wrapped up in this.

Now that Fremea Seivelun had been captured, he couldn’t put it off any longer.

Accelerator had killed Komaba, the person who wanted to protect her.

That gave him a reason why he had to protect Fremea.

♦

Kuroyoru Umidori snickered as she walked through the crowd of people.

(Fremea Seivelun has no use herself. She's just a Level 0. Normally, there would have been no reason to get her involved in this city's darkness.)

♦

"#1!!" Hamazura yelled, but Accelerator did not turn around.

Hamazura didn't know what it was that made Accelerator more of a monster than Mugino, but he held up the broken metal pipe regardless.

"We don't have time. Work with me. We should be able to find her much faster if we work together than if we work separately. If you have even the slightest desire to save that girl, then work with me!! If you don't know who she is, I'll tell you. Once you know, you'll know you need to help her. She's..."

"..."

Accelerator lightly waved his hand.

The second his hand touched the metal pipe in Hamazura's hand, the situation reversed.

With a dull noise, not only did the metal pipe fly from his hand, his body was slammed to the ground. Accelerator hit the switch at his neck and bent over towards Hamazura's collapsed body.

He was leaning over in order to completely incapacitate him.

At the very least, he was going to dislocate both of Hamazura's arms so he couldn't fight at all.

There was no rule saying the enemy of your enemy was your friend.

In fact, they both had completely different mental driving forces making them save people and continue to act.

♦

Kuroyoru rechecked the progress of the plan while the white coat held on only by its hood swayed back and forth.

(...Those personal connections are what are important. Fremea has a connection with Accelerator because he killed Komaba Ritoku and she has a connection with Hamazura and Mugino of Item through Frenda Seivelun.)

♦

(...I underestimated him...)

Hamazura gritted his teeth while lying collapsed on the ground.

Accelerator's hand reached out for his neck.

If Accelerator constricted Hamazura's carotid artery, he would lose consciousness right away. Hamazura couldn't imagine how much worse the situation would get if he lost that much time now that Fremea had been taken away.

He had to turn the situation around somehow.

(...I just need something. Anything. It just has to get him away from me...!!)

He felt around blindly with his hands and felt something hard in his right hand. It was a handgun that had fallen to the ground. It had mostly likely been dropped by an Anti-Skill member during everything that had been going on.

But that wasn't enough.

This was a monster that had destroyed a giant powered suit with one hand. Hamazura doubted firing a 9mm bullet straight on was going to do anything.

♦

Kuroyoru took out her handheld device and checked on the disorderly exchange between the higher ups.

(That's right. Hamazura Shiage and Accelerator. It's important that those two points connect creating a thick line.)

♦

Suddenly, Hamazura felt a change in Accelerator's gaze. He wasn't looking at Hamazura anymore. No matter how unimportant he was, he doubted Accelerator would normally move his attention away from the person he was in the middle of taking out.

Still lying on the ground, Hamazura looked over at the target of Accelerator's gaze.

It was someone in the crowd.

It was a small girl.

Hamazura didn't know, but the girl was called Last Order.

(...Can I use this...?)

He felt the weight of the handgun in his hand once more.

The #1 was truly a monster.

But the ability to protect oneself and the ability to protect others were two different things.

If that girl was someone he knew, it was possible Hamazura could use her as a hostage.

Even amid the crowd of onlookers, Hamazura had a clear shot at the girl. She was about 12 meters away. If he carefully aimed, he could definitely hit her. By threatening her, he could negotiate with that monster.

(...What should I do?)

There was no way he could deal with that monster using normal methods.

And every second counted if he was going to save Fremea.

(...What should I do?)

Hamazura's right arm twitched.

But before he could make any definite movements, Accelerator counterattacked.

With a dull noise, a dull shock ran across Hamazura's arm from the wrist to the elbow.

Accelerator was crushing the bones of Hamazura's right arm under all of his weight.

♦

Kuroyoru was satisfied because it seemed the higher ups were feeling just as much danger as the scenario had predicted.

(Well, of course they are. At the end of World War III, both Hamazura and Accelerator negotiated with the upper levels of Academy City. They've gotten pretty indecisive about that. Even though he's such a danger and even though he's such an eyesore, they can't interfere because of the negotiations.)

♦

"Gah....!?"

After confirming that the handgun had left Hamazura's fingers, Accelerator reached a hand up to the electrode's switch.

"...The second I hit this switch, all the blood in your body will reverse its flow and you'll die," Accelerator informed him in a coldhearted voice. "But answer me one thing first."

"What?"

"Why did you hesitate? You had enough time to aim for that brat and fire. ...Although, you may not have hit her."

Of course, if that had happened, he would have mercilessly killed Hamazura. Whether Hamazura had hit or not, Hamazura would have been a dead man the instant his finger had tightened on the trigger.

Hamazura didn't even look over at the gun that was now out of his reach.

He stared Accelerator straight in the eyes.

"...I had no reason."

"What?"

"I only have business with you. That girl isn't involved. I had no reason to get her involved."

"And how am I involved in this situation?"

"Komaba Ritoku."

Accelerator's eyebrows moved slightly when he heard that name.

Hamazura continued speaking regardless.

"What that man you killed wanted to protect down to the very, very end was Fremea. ...You should know why Leader Komaba was fighting Academy City's darkness. That's why you once fought for a Level 0 you had no connection to. But that isn't enough. If you truly understand what Leader Komaba's dying wish was, then you have a reason why you must save Fremea."

♦

An email arrived on Kuroyoru's handheld device.

The same email had most likely arrived at Silver Cross's powered suit.

(That's why we're overthrowing this stable state things are in.)

♦

“Tch,” Accelerator clicked his tongue.

He removed his weight from Hamazura, stood up, and muttered something.

He wasn’t talking to someone from the past.

He was talking to the person who had come up with the strategy he was now caught in.

“...Not just my own judgment, but Komaba’s dying wish? Fuck, so that’s the trick.”

♦

Kuroyoru looked over the characters on the screen.

They spelled out the decision made by the higher ups.

(Hamazura Shiage and Accelerator. When they were acting separately with their own factions, Academy City could simply go along with their negotiations. That’s why they let the two of them go even if it was temporary. But what if those rebels joined forces? What if they become a single rebel faction? The higher ups would no longer be able to just let their negotiations stand. There would be too much risk for them to sleep soundly at night without utterly taking out those rebels. Those two would no longer be just observed; they would be killed.)

♦

“What...?”

Hamazura looked puzzled, but Accelerator didn’t give a proper response.

They couldn’t stop the flow of events.

At that point, they had no choice but to act exactly as Kuroyoru Umidori and the rest of the Freshmen wanted.

♦

They had permission to attack.

She had held some slight doubts about the process, but the current threat level was clear.

Accelerator, Hamazura Shiage, and the people, funds, and emergency stores they both had were to be quickly demolished.

Permission to use deadly force if necessary had been given.

That simple order had been exactly what Kuroyoru had wanted from the higher ups.

(Hamazura's an idiot, but I'm sure Accelerator has figured it out by now. Right!? But you can't stop it now!! It doesn't matter if you know. Whether it's a trap or not, Fremea is going to be killed before your eyes!! You have no choice but to come running. And that's exactly why it'll piss you off so much, you overly optimistic Graduates!!)

"Heh heh. Ha ha ha

"...So the attackers weren't after Fremea. They were trying to get us to join together in order to increase the danger we presented to the upper levels of the city," muttered Hamazura as he recalled the truth that the #1 had told him as he stole the car.

Accelerator practically spat out his following words.

"They were trying to stir up the upper levels of the city. This incident isn't something the higher ups wanted. This is being carried out by the battle-crazy bastards who returned to the darkness even when given a chance to escape it."

"There's something wrong with them... I can't feel any kind of a sense of comfort from them."

"The problem isn't how fucked up they are. It's highly likely that they're including people other than us in this single rebel faction. In other words, once the higher ups recognize that our line has been formed, they might attack an apartment belonging to someone I know. Of course, they would also attack the people you know."

"...Are Takitsubo, Mugino, and Kinuhata being dragged back into this again?"

"This is all-out war. We can't compromise. Since we don't know how far this will spread outside of us, we have to completely obliterate them before the damage spreads."

Hamazura took out his cell phone as he drove down the zigzagging slopes without slowing down at all.

If his expectation was correct, Hanzou and Kuruwa would be fine.

Before the Edge Bee attack when they had lost contact with Kuruwa, the line hadn't been formed yet, so, at the very least, they wouldn't have the foundation ready to kill her.

The ones the enemies would go straight for were Hamazura and Accelerator.

Their enemies.

The Freshmen.

"Hanzou, where are you!?" he said quickly once the phone connected.

The sports car had made it out of the parking garage.

"I managed to find Kuruwa somehow or other. But it's odd. Kuruwa wasn't captured or even attacked. She just had her service cut off by the phone company. Hey, Hamazura, what's—?"

"Fremea was captured."

Because they had no time, Hamazura ignored Hanzou's question.

For the moment, he drove off in the direction the 4-legged powered suit had gone, but he didn't have any clue if he was on the right track.

"She was taken to the east of the private salon in District 3! But I don't know specifically where. Hanzou, where are you now? Can you cut ahead of them!?"

"What did they look like?"

"It was that bastard in the powered suit. This one has 4 legs and a giant propeller on the back. But I really doubt he would go all the way to his hideout in that thing. He must have a trailer or some large vehicle to store it in."

"So a large specialized vehicle instead of a normal car. ...We might still be able to track them down."

"What?"

"There are plenty of ways."

♦

The second he had heard that Fremea had been captured, Hanzou had breathed a heavy breath. This was because he had realized why Kuruwa's phone had been stopped.

Kuruwa was sobbing into her hands over having been used by the enemies.

"H-how could I, a ninja descendent, have been tricked into informing the enemy of a small girl's location...?"

"This is a world of fool or be fooled, so the odds of a real ninja being fooled are about 50/50, really."

"No!! A ninja is supposed to...y'know, be a master of splendid intellectual tricks! A ninja group needs to be an elite group that can trick an evil prefectural governor guarded by ronin and bodyguards at every turn!!"

"Ninja was already an outdated occupation by the time the prefectural governors came into power during the Edo period," responded Hanzou.

He brought his hand behind his back and pulled a 30 cm square piece of thick paper out from a gap in his jacket. It was waterproofed like the spoons that came with 100 yen yogurts and it had lines on it to show where to fold.

He folded the thick paper and it became a rather tricky-looking paper airplane.

In a couple of places, he stuck on a couple of motors about the size of the nail on his pinky, added on some small flaps and a rudder, and taped on a camera and transceiver to the bottom.

It was an MAV, a micro air vehicle.

“There really is no place for a ninja now that you can make one of these things with objects bought at a discount shop,” Hanzou exaggerated in self-derision and tossed the MAV into the air with just his right arm.

The remotely-controlled ninja of justice flew through the air to save Fremea.

♦

“Hamazura. I’ve sent a flying radio-controlled camera your way. I’m sending the footage live to your phone. There shouldn’t be too many vehicles large enough to carry the powered suit and it should be fairly visible from above.”

“A toy plane, huh?”

Hamazura was holding the steering wheel and he set his phone to speaker phone and threw it to Accelerator. He was still pressing the gas pedal down as far as it would go, so it wasn’t the time to be driving with only one hand.

“How fast can the camera plane go?”

“150 kph. If they’re tuned like an F1 racer they could lose me, but I’m not restricted by the roads. I can send it on a straight course regardless of the terrain.”

“Found it,” muttered Accelerator as he stared at the screen of the cell phone in his lap. “It’s 5 kilometers ahead. The powered suit is racing along next to a giant dump truck. The truck is empty. It looks like it’s full of iron ore, but that’s fake. It most likely has a large maintenance area inside. There’s a tunnel ahead of them. It looks like it’s going to enter the truck on the go.”

Hanzou gave a puzzled silence in response to the new voice that suddenly cut in, but he started speaking again shortly thereafter. He must have realized that it wasn’t the time to ask.

“That isn’t good. The MAV observes from the sky and the signal is meant for a toy, so it won’t reach that far. You need to catch up to them soon. Everything is lost if they get away.”

Hamazura briefly looked over at Accelerator.

“...I know it’s not my place to ask since I got you wrapped up in this, but is that kid okay?”

“Who are you talking about? It feels like I’ve been dealing with no one but brats lately.”

“Umm...” Hamazura pictured the girl he had seen at the scene before in his head and tried and describe her. “She looked about 10, had short brown hair, and looked completely thoughtless...or maybe even a little stupid-lookin-ghwhf!?”

Hamazura suddenly uttered a weird noise because Accelerator had grabbed his nose and slightly twisted it.

“...You don’t need to worry about that brat. I had someone else with me back there.”

“U-um, sir? Don’t you realize I’m trying to drive here?”

Accelerator clicked his tongue and let go.

“A tunnel, huh?”

“You have the strongest power in Academy City, right? Won’t this be easy for you to take care of?”

“...”

Accelerator didn’t want to reveal unnecessary information, but he decided Hamazura most likely already knew since his leader, Komaba, had fought knowing his weakness. He pointed at his choker-style electrode.

“If I wanted to, I could chase after a fighter jet, but there’s a danger that damage to the signal could cause me to lose control of my power. I don’t like the idea of that tunnel. The greater the power I try to use, the greater the reaction if I lose control.”

(...I caught a glimpse of what he could do in Russia, but just how far does his power go?)

He was a person that shoved *Mugino Shizuri* to 4th place. He had to have some kind of crazy power.

“So you’re saying we can’t rely on your power?”

“...I just said I didn’t like it.”

“Same thing.” The tires squealed as Hamazura merged into a large bypass. “We’ll just have to catch up to them with this!!”

With a further squeal of rubber, the sports car accelerated. As the car cut between the family cars crawling along at the legal speed limit and cut further and further ahead, they saw their targets.

They saw the giant dump truck and the 4-legged power suit.

“They’re going in the tunnel,” announced Accelerator as their targets slid into a large cave made of reinforced concrete.

With a lag of a few seconds, Hamazura and Accelerator followed them.

Their vision was filled with orange lights.

Accelerator trembled slightly in the passenger seat. He seemed to be enduring something. Hamazura started to look over at him, but Accelerator stopped the trembling with a hand.

“...It may be empty inside, but that truck is still 10 times heavier than us.”

“Yeah, if we hit it head on, we’d just get blown away.”

“Do you know how to stop it?”

“Yes, although it isn’t really something worthy of praise.”

The back of the dump truck opened before their eyes. It wasn’t that its cargo of ore opened or that the giant container on the back did. A crack appeared across the entire thing at a ridiculous point and it opened up from there. It looked something like a trompe l’oeil.

The dump truck and the powered suit matched their speeds and the loading process began.

When one of the suit’s 4 legs was placed on the inside of the dump truck, Hamazura moved forward with the sports car.

It was true that a mere 2-door would do nothing if it slammed into a dump truck 10 times its weight. It would literally just be repelled and the car would be done for.

However...

No matter how large the dump truck was, it still only had 4 points of contact with the ground, gained its power from the wheels rotating at high speed, and, most importantly, was moving forward. This of course meant that not every direction you applied force from would have the same result. For example, the dump truck was a weapon of steel moving at 200 kph, but the 4-legged powered suit had matched its speed and succeeded in softly laying a leg on the truck.

Question time: What change would the 2-door car cause if it rubbed up against the dump truck from the diagonal back corner?

The squeal of the tires rang out.

The dump truck had been moving with as much stability as a roller coaster that was supported by rails, but it suddenly stuck out of its lane by quite a bit.

Hamazura had not struck the truck with pure force.

Instead, he had matched its speed as much as he could, slowly gotten right up next to the truck's metal body, and then "pushed" it.

This was the kind of driving trick Anti-Skill used to forcibly stop out-of-control vehicles.

The reason Hamazura knew how to do this was simple.

"That Anti-Skill woman with the jersey and the giant tits used to do this to me all the time!!"

He didn't need a huge amount of power.

The dump truck provided that for him. Just by slightly shaking the flow of that power, it would lose control on its own.

If this were in the middle of the city, there would be the possibility of secondary damages, but there were only thick concrete walls on either side in the tunnel.

Sparks flew.

The dump truck had lost control and was scraping up against the wall. The powered suit was only just getting inside the truck and it had to go back out on the road due to the shaking.

"This is our chance!!"

The giant powered suit was running alongside them so close it felt like they could touch it if they reached out the window.

"Look inside the glove compartment, #1!! If you find something to write with in with the maps, break the marker in half and break open the ink!! If you can cover its lens, it won't be able to run anymore!!"

"...It doesn't look like that's going to happen."

Accelerator pointed and Hamazura couldn't believe his eyes when he looked that way again.

The driver of the dump truck that had been scraping up against the wall had turned the steering wheel as hard as he could as if fighting back in the truck's death throes.

A wall of steel approached them.

Knowing that the car would lose balance, Hamazura slammed on the brakes. The giant mass crossed right in front of them and their bumper was torn off, but the car itself survived. Hamazura and Accelerator had just barely survived.

But their car was not the only thing that had lost its balance. Having suddenly swung its giant mass around, the dump truck was now completely out of control.

The truck was now moving diagonally in the straight tunnel.

Even from outside it was clear that the driver attempted to correct the truck's trajectory by frantically turning the steering wheel as if he were trying to drive in a giant S shape.

However, its front wheels were already in the air.

The giant truck completely collapsed onto its side in the tunnel. Even though Hamazura immediately slammed on the brakes, it was clear which of the two vehicles was decelerating faster. The 2-door car's wheels were still spinning and the dump truck was scraping up against the wall and the ground.

They were going to hit it.

Hamazura turned the steering wheel planning on hitting the truck with their side. He naturally chose to have the passenger side hit the truck and Accelerator put his hand to the electrode's switch preparing to shove the vector's to Hamazura's side even if that brought the danger of losing control.

"Tch!! You fucker. Did you factor me into your decision!?"

"What? That 4-legged power suit will be stopped by this as much as we—!!"

Hamazura trailed off and swallowed his words.

There was a space between the collapsed dump truck and the ceiling.

A normal vehicle had no way of getting through that area, but the 4-legged power suit jumped through it like the truck was a hurdle.

"You're kidding..." muttered Hamazura dumbfounded.

The dump truck and the 2-door car collided. Their speeds had been matched to a certain extent due to the brakes, but the shock had not been brought down to zero. Even though it was the side of the car that struck the truck, the steering wheel exploded and the airbag shot out. That completely cut off Hamazura's vision and the movement of his hands.

The two vehicles continued to slide.

They slid out of the tunnel.

After continuing on for a few dozen more meters, they finally came to a stop.

The air started leaving the airbag and Hamazura struck it with his fist to speed up the process. He then yelled to Accelerator.

“Go after him, #1!!”

“...”

“We’re out of the tunnel. Your signal’s fine now, so nothing can stop you now!!”

The passenger side door was crushed up against the dump truck, so it couldn’t open properly, but that didn’t stop that monster.

He touched the switch on his neck.

A loud impact could be heard.

Academy City’s #1 tore off the entire roof and chased after the fleeing powered suit.

Part 12

“Yes, yes. That’s correct. It seems there was an accident near the exit of the tunnel. Hah? Yes, yes, it’s fine. Nothing really happened here. We’re just stuck in the tunnel. We can’t go forward or backwards.”

A middle aged maintenance worker was talking into his cell phone while he leaned up against the side of a large trailer and scowled at the orange lights and the smell of exhaust.

A small embroidery on his chest gave his name as Jousawa Michihiko.

The trailer behind him was not a giant container. It was made only of the metal framework, so the cargo could be seen from outside the box-shaped frame.

“I think it’s going to take some time to get the cargo in. Well, it’s a three-lane road, so bikes have been driving on between the other cars. If I only had permission to take it out directly...I can’t? Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He was definitely going to be late due to the traffic congestion, but Jousawa didn’t seem that irritated by it.

In fact, he almost seemed to welcome the delay.

He hung up the phone and grabbed the radio hooked at his waist.

He was contacting the driver of the large trailer.

“I’ve informed them of the delay. They just said they want us to change the transportation route a bit.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t matter that much to them,” spat out the driver. “This’ll never be used again. Actually, I guess it was never used in the first place. It’ll be sealed up completely airtight and then given eternal sleep in some warehouse. Later it might be taken out for some derivative research, disassembled, studied, and then put back to eternal sleep. It’s like an insect specimen. There’s no real reason to rush this. They’d just laugh it off even if we were late by half a year.”

Listening to the driver, Jousawa looked at the contents of the trailer he had been riding on previously.

A vehicle was thoroughly bound with a number of metal fixtures and reinforced rubber belts.

“Isn’t it a good thing it didn’t have to be used?” he said.

“Well, it’s a good thing it didn’t have to be used in the war.”

It was the HsSSV-01 Dragon Rider.

It was the ultimate monster of a military bike that had been scheduled to be brought into World War III.

As the war had ended sooner than expected, that new model had lost its chance to be used in combat.

It had been all over the news that the weapons that were no longer to be used in the war were being transferred to large warehouses in Districts 2 and 23.

“But surely there was some other way it could have been used,” added the driver. “The Dragon Rider was originally supposed to be Anti-Skill’s new patrol bike, after all. Instead, it was confiscated for use in World War III, spent the entire time of the war being remodeled, and now it’s going for eternal sleep within a warehouse without ever having been used. I’m sure you people didn’t develop it for this to happen.”

Those two had no way of knowing, but Silver Cross’s collection was a crystallization of the technology of the city’s dark side while the Dragon Rider was created by the city’s surface for an ally of justice to use.

“Bikes are a different genre, but does it make you mad as a driver?”

“How do you feel as one of the people that created it?”

Its top speed was 1,050 kph.

The large bike within the box-shaped frame trailer had a jet engine put in as if it were sticking straight through the body of the bike, linear engines installed inside the wheels that were completely protected by circular armor, wing-like arms stretching back from the left and right of the front wheel area, and boosters that both gave auxiliary power and forced steering.

“Well...”

It also had gyros for stability, completely electronically controlled anti-shock suspension, and wings on the back to keep the machine on the ground aerodynamically. All of these devices were needed to ensure the machine moved along the ground properly when driving at full speed.

“As you said, I didn’t really want this to be used in war.”

Its specs had been solidified with the idea of being able to freely fly across the wastelands of Russia at over 1,000 kph and to climb cliffs with a slope of 70 degrees at over 300 kph. The biggest problem in its development had been how to keep the monster on the ground when it would fly off into the air if you didn’t do anything to stop it.

“I don’t care how. I just want it to be useful to someone at least once.”

The driver briefly remained silent after hearing that.

He finally asked the maintenance worker another question.

“Did they tell you why they want us to change our transportation route?”

“Don’t change the subject. I know you’re mad.”

“I bet the darkness has made another move. The same darkness that is taking this and not letting anyone use it even once.”

“They said some kid’s been abducted.”

“Hah. They tell us that and yet tell us to keep the road free for them.”

Jousawa had heard some of it from his talk on the phone, but the driver must have been contacted by an official over the vehicle’s radio.

“Complaining about it won’t solve anything,” responded Jousawa with a bit of self-derision. “I’m in charge of the weapon’s maintenance and you’re the driver in charge of

transporting it. We're the ones that fortify Dragon Rider's place. We can't hope for the position of the hero who gallantly appears riding it."

That was when Jousawa heard a clunk. It sounded like something had struck the outside of the trailer. When he went to check, he saw a person. A boy who looked like he was in high school was propping himself up on the metal frame.

Jousawa assumed he must have either been in the accident that was holding up traffic or he was feeling unwell from being stuck in the tunnel for so long.

He was wrong.

The boy was actually climbing up the frame. He then suddenly spoke.

"Ooh, this is nice. Let me borrow it."

"Hah?"

"That bike."

"Hey, hey," Jousawa muttered under his breath.

The high school boy knelt down next to Dragon Rider while it was strapped to the metal frame with numerous reinforced rubber belts. It looked like he was trying to find the bike's keyhole.

Jousawa had been a bit on guard, but he relaxed when he saw that amateurish action.

"Give it up. You can't start something like that just by sticking some wires in."

"Oh, I got it. I got it."

"Hey!! What are you, part of a security team!?"

"I'm studying to work in road service."

"This is well beyond that level!!"

To prevent electronic hacking, it used an extremely elaborate analog lock. However, it wasn't something that high school kid should have been able to deal with.

The boy straddled the Dragon Rider while it was still strapped in by the reinforced rubber.

"Like I said before, I'm going to be borrowing this bike. I'd rather not explain the details, but I can assure you that you will be helping save someone's life if you help me here."

“Are you delivering a pregnant women who’s about to give birth to the hospital?”

Jousawa had said that as a joke, but the response he got was completely serious.

“...It’s more serious than that.”

“I see.” Jousawa pointed towards the reinforced rubber. “But those restraints and bolts holding the Dragon Rider in can’t be removed with your bare hands. You need special equipment and at least two large adults to do it. And a student like you wouldn’t know how to use the equipment even if I gave it to you.”

“...”

The boy grabbed a reinforced rubber belt, started to say something, stopped speaking, looked troubled, and then finally started speaking.

“...Did you see the 4-legged powered suit that was running through this tunnel a bit ago?”

“No. This bypass tunnel is 3 kilometers long. How would I see something that was ahead of me in the tunnel?”

“That suit abducted a little girl.”

Jousawa’s eyebrows twitched when he heard that.

He had heard why the transportation route had been changed.

“She’s about 10 years old. She was abducted as a warning. They’re going to kill her in as cruel a way as possible in order to stir up our anger. Enough that we join together. The reason they didn’t kill her back there was most likely to give us the disgrace of having had her completely slip through our fingers. They’re going to take their time in killing her now.”

“What?”

But he hadn’t heard that much.

Jousawa hadn’t been informed that the girl was going to be killed.

“Maybe they’ll send her back to us stuffed into a plastic bag later or maybe they’ll send us a live broadcast. I don’t know exactly how they’ll do it. I don’t want to think about it. So I need to chase after them again before we’ve completely lost them.”

Jousawa heard a bit of static coming from his radio.

It was the emergency confirmation sign. If he didn’t respond to it, it would be deemed that something was wrong and the driver would take action. And the driver was carrying a sawed-off shotgun in order to protect the military secrets.

“Wait.”

However, Jousawa purposefully pressed further when the situation would have resolved itself with his silence.

No response came from the radio.

The high school boy turned around.

“What?”

“Tell me that girl’s name.”

“Why?”

“Just do it!! That will solve everything!!”

“It’s Fremea! Fremea Seivelun!! She’s about 10 years old, has fluffy blonde hair, and blue eyes! Is that enough? Do you want more!? Should I also tell you that she’s extremely interested in games full of blood spurting everywhere and she hates green peas!?” The boy was yelling in confusion. “Please. I need to borrow this to save her!! I know you may not be able to follow this crazy story, but she really is going to be killed if I don’t do anything!! That girl who was smiling just a bit ago will go cold and never open her eyes again...!!”

But Jousawa smiled.

Information from the darkness wasn’t an easy thing to get. And this boy knew Fremea Seivelun’s name and a bunch of other information on her that wasn’t in the documents and that made it sound like he actually knew her.

He was truly a part of this.

Unlike the maintenance worker or the driver who just worked on the outside, this boy could avoid a tragedy with the Dragon Rider.

Thinking about it that way, Jousawa made his decision.

“Wait. You can’t get on it like that.”

“You don’t think I’m about to go through all the official paperwork, do you?”

“It’s something simpler than that. You can’t control that dark horse on your own.”

“...I don’t have time to get pro sports training right now.”

“That’s not what I mean. Even the top 10 legendary road racers wouldn’t be able to have the grip or endurance to drive that.” Jousawa pointed towards another machine lying in a corner of the trailer.

“It has to be used along with that special powered suit.”

♦

The HsSSV-01 was developed as a new model of powered suit.

Its design did away with the requirement of looking like a human body.

In other words, it wasn’t a bike created for powered suits to ride; it was a powered suit that included a bike.

It was intended to maintain overwhelming mobility in all weather and in all environments and to suppress enemy forces with swift deployment.

It was meant to drive at over 1,000 kph in wastelands, not just on a finely maintained circuit. It could drive up 30-meter cliffs at a slope of 70 degrees in what seemed like off road bike acrobatics and could clear 20 meter wide rivers.

The machine’s power reinforced one’s physical strength and had thorough electronic control to maintain balance, so it was possible to let go with one hand to use a Gatling gun or smoothbore gun even at high speed. If it had actually made it to the war front, it might have completely changed the history of war.

“Not bad, right?” Jousawa called out to Hamazura Shiage who was “changing” behind a wooden box in a corner of the trailer that was fixed to the floor. “The powered suit gives you the strength, endurance, and oxygen intake you need to operate the Dragon Rider. That suit itself is no monster. It’s more or less human-shaped so your center of gravity won’t shift and it doesn’t have much weight of its own. Well, you can always put module armor on for various uses.”

Hamazura opened and closed his hands to check it out.

The entire thing was exceedingly small. Unlike the models that looked like thicker versions of Western armor, this one was more like a riding suit with a full face helmet attached. It was gray with black protectors attached where needed.

The suit wasn’t that much bigger than a human, so Hamazura’s body stretched throughout the entire suit including the ends of the arms and legs.

“...It feels weird because it fits almost too perfectly.”

Hamazura’s voice was muffled because the helmet entirely covered his head.

There were no transparent portions on the helmet. Vision and all other information was acquired with electronic devices and displayed on the inside.

Even so, it didn't feel odd and he almost felt like he was seeing everything with his own eyes.

It almost made him afraid he would never be able to use his normal vision again if he used it for too long.

"You're going to be driving at high subsonic speeds on obstacle covered terrain. The speed will feel many times greater than in a fighter jet, so you wouldn't be able to control it without equipment like that."

"...Seriously?"

"Don't worry. Theoretically, you should be fine even if you bring out its top speed."

The driver who had been watching that exchange finally spoke.

"Is this really okay?"

"You helped release the Dragon Rider from its restraints, didn't you?"

"Aren't you just getting carried away on the idea of saving this girl?"

"A written apology and a bit of docked pay is well worth saving someone's life."

"..."

Jousawa ignored the driver's silence and turned back to Hamazura who was now straddling the Dragon Rider.

"Promise me."

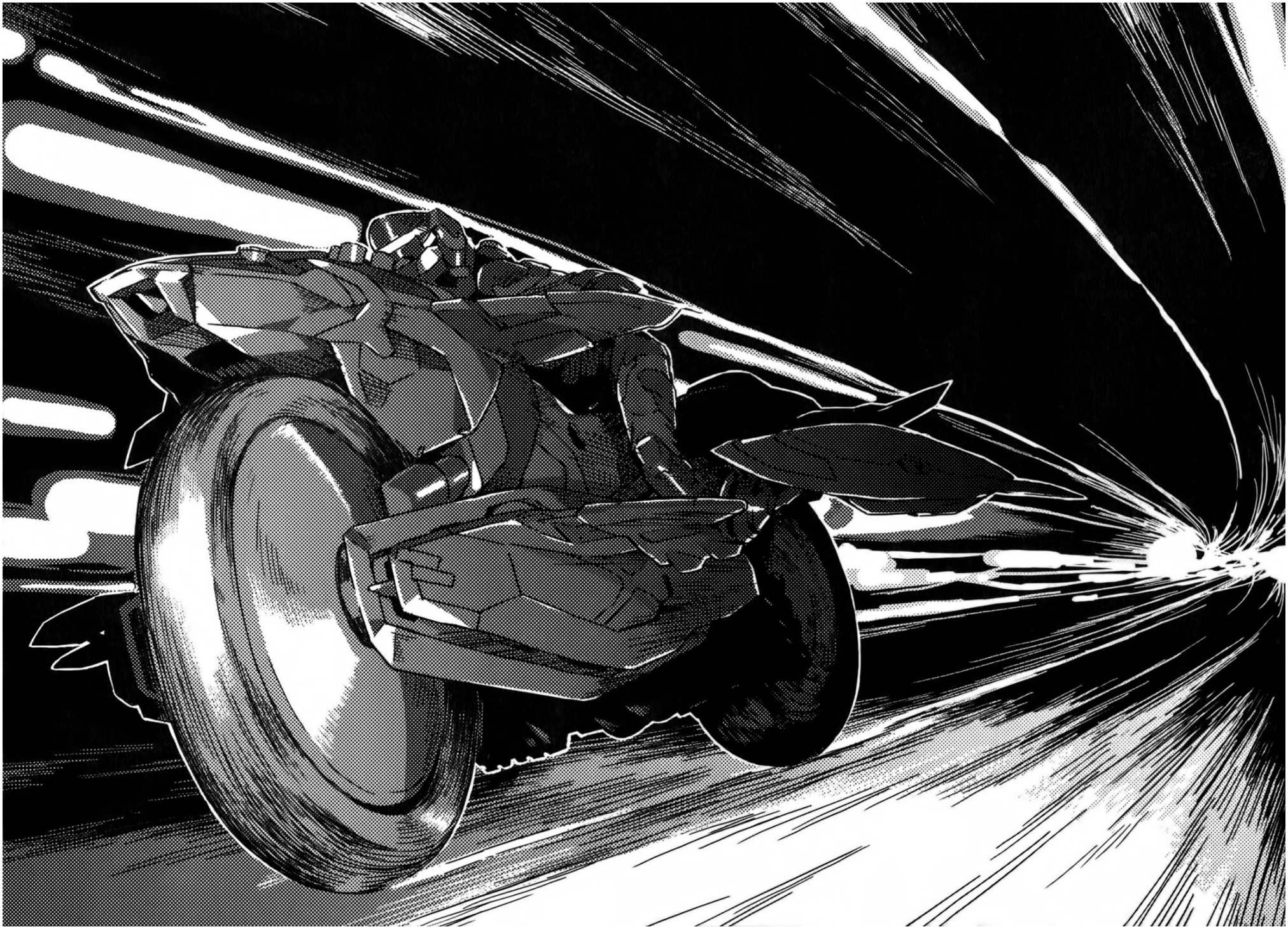
"I'll try to bring it back undamaged, but it may be difficult to keep it completely unscathed."

"Use its specs to their fullest. If you end up scrapping it, that's fine. Also, let's see..." Jousawa's expression suddenly turned serious and the atmosphere cooled as if his previous appearance had been a lie. "Make sure you save that girl."

"...Oh, I will."

The Dragon Rider carefully moved down the ramp from the trailer to the tunnel road.

It sped up from there.



With a loud roar, the Dragon Rider began speeding between the cars stopped throughout the tunnel.

Jousawa laughed as he watched the flame of the jet engine roar away.

He hadn't cared how.

He just wanted it to be useful to someone at least once.

"...Granny. Our cute grandkid is finally off saving someone."

"The result will give this meaning. Just going off to try to save someone isn't enough."

Part 13

To be completely honest, Hamazura Shiage wasn't able to control the Dragon Rider how he had expected.

In fact, his vision became distorted the second the bike accelerated.

"Gah....!?"

He couldn't tell what was going on ahead of him or behind him. He was going so fast that he couldn't keep up with the processing of the visual information. By the time he had figured that out, the tunnel's smooth wall was approaching from the side.

"Fuck this. There's no way in hell I can control this thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnggggggggg!!"

His vision darkened.

All sound disappeared.

His throat went completely dry.

But...

"Huh?"

Hamazura was in complete disorder, but he hadn't crashed yet.

His body, his arms, and his fingers were moving on their own.

(...What...?)

Instead of feeling relieved that he wasn't going to die, Hamazura felt an indescribable uneasiness creep down his back.

(...This is just going too smoothly. I don't even know that much about bikes. Is something controlling my movements from outside...!?)

The powered suit Hamazura was wearing used motors and chemical springs to enhance the person's movements.

Normally, it would move in response to Hamazura's will, but it could of course do the opposite.

In other words, the powered suit was guiding him by supporting his movements.

This led to the body of Hamazura Shiage moving in top form.

At first glance it looked convenient, but...

(Ohhhh!? Th-this is like driving a bike in a ninin-baori!! How the hell am I supposed to relax!?)

His body and mind were separated.

The discord caused by other movements taking precedence over the movements he wanted to make brought fear.

It could be mistaken for doing something amazing, but it made him feel like he was trapped in his own body.

"Shit!! This feels wrong. First the weapons in Russia and now this! Why am I always surrounded by these crazy machines!?"

Jousawa had said the bike forcibly inserted "artificial feelings".

The Dragon Rider didn't need to be operated in any complicated way.

The basics of controlling it were closer to that of a scooter than of a bike. Hamazura just had to move his fingers within the handlebars that were completely covered in armor. There was no concept of gears or a clutch. It only had a throttle and a brake. In other words, it could only be accelerated and decelerated. Both could be controlled from both grips on the handlebars, so controlling it one handed was no problem. The bike had a jet engine, auxiliary boosters, and linear engines, but these various driving forces were controlled automatically to achieve the speed required.

However, even all that wasn't enough for someone to perfectly control it the first time they grabbed the handlebars.

There was no way it was that much of a monster.

The Dragon Rider had a jet engine piercing through its main body and the front was pointed to reduce friction from the air. It was a large and heavy bike, so driving it should have been fairly difficult.

And weaving between cars in a traffic jam would send the difficulty level soaring up. Getting a bike that big through the cars would have been difficult even for a driving instructor.

And yet the Dragon Rider was slipping between the stopped cars. When Hamazura looked down at the displayed speed, he choked. He had already exceeded 400 kph. For a normal car, it wouldn't have been surprising if the meter had shaken off at that speed.

Of course, Hamazura was not that skilled.

It may have been impossible even for a professional stunt driver to carry out such delicate maneuvers.

(...Come to think of it, a powered suit is a tool to reinforce human capabilities from outside.)

Powered suits weren't just machines used to increase the strength of one's arms and legs.

That suit was made in Academy City.

It did help him externally with the motors and chemical springs, but the odds were it didn't end there.

Normally, he would have been in a complete panic at that speed.

He would have been too afraid to think at all. He wouldn't have been able to think about what to do next.

That wasn't happening. Hamazura found it to be a bit disturbing, but he was giving the powered suit orders and the machine was calculating what the rider wanted and what would best carry that out. Hamazura was simply too calm for all that was going on.

Most likely, the suit was helping him out internally, too.

The suit had ways of connecting the human to the machine by applying electrical stimuli and distributing the temperature of the brain.

There was also the hectically changing information coming from his 5 senses. His vision was especially badly blurred. Everything looked like an aggregation of curves that looked like the laser beams from a shooting game.

Even so, Hamazura was obtaining information from it.

He wasn't seeing it in slow motion; he was getting information from the flowing lines. He wasn't seeing single objects frozen in place either. He actually felt like he was the resident of a world where things were always flowing by.

His cognizance had changed.

Perhaps it could be said to be similar to language. An alphabet looked like nothing but weird designs to those who didn't know it, but those who did know it naturally picked up meaning from it.

His senses were being modified inside and out.

His thoughts may have been moving even faster than when he was sitting at a desk studying.

He was a 1 cm error away from crashing, but he was still able to perform those bike acrobatics.

The Dragon Rider left the tunnel.

Hamazura opened up the throttle all the way.

Immediately afterwards, he felt a shock.

The arms for the auxiliary boosters that had been folded up on either side of the front wheel opened up. The noise increased exponentially and a shock wave was formed as the energy created by the internal-combustion engine threw him further forward.

This was the bike's true form.

The speedometer jumped up to the 900 kph line.

At this speed, a flesh-and-blood human would have been unable to breathe in oxygen or even open his eyes and it wouldn't have been unusual to be burned by the frictional heat. This was a world where one would strike an object 250 meters ahead after a single second. The cars around him had to have been moving fairly quickly, but they didn't even look like they were standing still. It looked like they were flying towards him.

He forcibly carried on by using the corrections provided by the powered suit.

Even then, a fear great enough to interfere with the movements of his mind or body did not well up within him.

Just like the machine he was riding, his thoughts moved only forward.

He knew exactly where every little pebble and empty can on the road was and avoided them with the least possible movement.

He ignored several traffic lights and just cut through the intersection as the Dragon Rider continued on.

However...

He had a sense of the outer motors and chemical springs correcting his body's movements and he could tell the suit was interfering with him on the inside, too.

It was helping him out, but it felt like his awareness of where the center of his being was would be destroyed if he used the bike for a long period of time.

(...My phone.)

He was wearing a military vest over the powered suit that could have various objects put it in it. His cell phone was inside it.

He started to consider whether it was okay for him to let go with one hand in his condition.

(...If I don't get a look at the data from Hanzou's MAV, I won't know where my target is.)

Before he could even complain in his heart, something changed.

At the edge of the images that constituted Hamazura's vision, a small window appeared. Needless to say, it contained the data from Hamazura's cell phone.

(How is it forwarding the data!? I didn't do anything!!)

Academy City-made military weapons were as abnormal as ever. From what had just happened, Hamazura decided that conspiracy theories about machines spying on your mind may not be something to laugh at anymore.

The distant view given by the cell phone data had pretty much lost sight of the target. Something indistinct was moving deep in the image, but the shapes of the moving object was indistinguishable. It looked like it would be easier to look for a nearby building or billboard to use as a landmark.

(It looks like Hanzou's MAV isn't going to be much more use...)

It had gotten too far away.

If he let the enemy do what they wanted much longer, there would truly be no way to guarantee Fremea's life.

(No.)

"Wait," Hamazura mumbled.

He looked up while racing along at high speed. The sky filled his vision. In the jumbled cityscape, it was difficult to spot things 200 meters ahead, but the sky was different. There were no objects to obstruct his view and nothing was hidden behind the horizon, so he could even spot things that were a great distance away.

Even if he couldn't spot the 4-legged powered suit that had abducted Fremea, he would be able to find it if he could spot something that was chasing after the suit.

Of course, he couldn't exactly spot an MAV that could be as far as 10 km away. Even with the powered suit reinforcing his senses, searching for an MAV the size of a paper airplane was no small feat.

But Hamazura was following something else.

Academy City's strongest Level 5 could chase after a fighter jet if he wanted to.

Part 14

Silver Cross Alpha was on the run.

The plan was supposed to have been complete.

The targets, Hamazura Shiage and Accelerator, had joined together to protect Fremea Seivelun. Now that they had become a force that the upper levels of the city couldn't ignore, Silver Cross's objective was mostly complete. All that was left was to kill Fremea in such a way that the force that couldn't be ignored would bare their fangs in revenge against the dark side and upper levels of Academy City.

It didn't matter whether they would truly oppose the city.

It was like attaching a detonation fuse into a large pile of gunpowder. Whether anyone truly wanted to detonate it or not, it had to be defused. As such, the Graduates would have to be exterminated.

That was how it was supposed to go.

So why could he still not get to a safe area?

The 4-legged powered suit did not have a human form. As such, the lenses that acted as eyes were not installed only on the front.

One of the lenses on that model had spotted his pursuer.

#1.

Academy City's strongest.

It was a white figure called Accelerator.

(This isn't normal.)

Silver Cross's breath caught in his throat from shock when he looked at the speedometer.

750 kph.

He was near the limit for vehicles that raced along the ground.

And yet that monster was still right behind him.

(He's at the level of an airplane.)

"That monster!! I knew he was a monster, but I never thought he was enough to rival the Highway Cheetah!!"

Silver Cross was looking up.

20 meters up.

His pursuer had 4 whirlwinds on his back and was literally slicing through the air after Silver Cross.

"Silver Cross."

"I can't do it. I can't lose him even with the speed of the Highway Cheetah. A couple of undercover vehicles come to mind, but I can only use them once I've lost my pursuer, so they're useless now!!"

His powered suit was not a car. By folding up and unfolding its legs to match the ground, it could race across areas with large ups and downs and even down extremely narrow passageways.

And yet he still couldn't get away.

His opponent was the size of a human after all. Even if his 4-legged powered suit could slip into various gaps, it was hard to find a place that the suit could go but the human couldn't.

"If she gets taken back now, this was all for naught. Should I dispose of her now?"

"Don't assume you're going to lose. You can't be losing your way."

Kuroyoru's voice so calm it sounded like she didn't care about the situation. That may have been the case.

"Accelerator has great power, but why didn't he go all out from the very beginning? When he first came after the vehicle disguised as a dump truck, he rode in Hamazura's stolen car. Think about it, Silver Cross. In a situation like this, he wouldn't have done that without a reason."

"...I see." Within the thick powered suit, Silver Cross sat within the smaller armadillo-like model and chuckled. "Signal interference...the tunnel!!"

Now that he had figured it out, the rest was easy.

Silver Cross moved over to the subway line running alongside the road. In order to reduce the noise, it was an area one step lower than the rest of the area sort of like a river made of concrete.

Of course, further along was the complex group of tunnels for the various lines. The layout of the tunnels was reminiscent of a spider web.

The suit's lens caught Accelerator's lips moving in a curse.

Shortly thereafter, the sky was covered by thick concrete.

He had entered the tunnel.

Of course, just a tunnel wasn't enough to completely seal Accelerator's movements. If so, he would have been assassinated long ago. The interference was only something that *may* happen. That meant his power could end up being weakened by some unknown amount.

However, if he lost control of his power even for a few seconds while surrounded by concrete and chasing after someone at over 700 kph, he would be dead. Scraping up against the wall would be enough to turn him to mincemeat.

He couldn't continue the chase.

If he was willing to destroy and rip off the top of the tunnel that was also part of the city, he could continue, but he most likely wouldn't do that. If he was a complete villain, he might have done so, but sadly the #1 was no longer that far down that path.

Simply put, he wouldn't sacrifice others to carry out his own goals.

Even when refusing to do so put the life of the person he was protecting at risk.

"Kuroyoru. I've managed to escape. This tunnel is shared by a number of lines. A great number of routes connect here to save time on construction. They won't be able to track my escape path from the air now."

"The #1's power is maintained by the battery of the electrode around his neck. We don't know the exact time limit, but I doubt he'll keep using it at full power when he has no clear objective. He's sure to turn it off at least for now. Get some distance between the two of you while he's stuck there. ...There's also the matter of 'them'. We can't be delayed at this stage."

"Understood. Now that I've lost him, everything can go ahead as pla—"

Silver Cross trailed off.

It was odd.

He felt something overpowering from behind him.

The tunnel was dark. Unlike a tunnel for cars, light wasn't needed for trains to avoid a sudden curve because they had set tracks. The evenly spaced fluorescent lights were of little use and a seemingly impenetrable darkness stretched before him and behind him.

However, this didn't matter to the 4-legged powered suit. Its numerous lenses allowed it pick up information even in that almost complete darkness.

Silver Cross's face stiffened when he looked at the window displaying the revised footage.

"What...?"

It wasn't Accelerator.

A giant mysterious bike was approaching from behind. As if the bike were saying it had caught sight of Silver Cross's lenses, a number of boosters lit up.

With a roar, the darkness was wiped away.

Other than Accelerator, there was only one person who could possibly be chasing after Silver Cross to protect Fremea Seivelun.

“It couldn’t be...!!”

Part 15

A great roar surrounded Hamazura’s body.

The subway tunnel had only just barely been made so the construction workers could walk through it. Efficiently constructing the track had been the priority, so the ground was covered in bumpy concrete tiles.

Normally, driving through there at a few hundred kph would have been suicide.

But that didn’t matter.

Hamazura twisted the throttle lever releasing all three means of propulsion without hesitation.

(I can do this...The Dragon Rider simply has more speed!!)

The problem was how to stop that thickly armored powered suit and rescue Fremea from it once he had caught up. Somehow breaking the propeller blades might work, but...

“If you’re short on firepower use the auxiliary boosters,” said the voice of the trailer’s maintenance worker. “If things are looking bad, there’s a mechanism to eject some of the fuel in order to reduce the damage. If you do it right, you create a 3500 degree explosion. However, you can only use it once on either side.”

“Wait. I don’t know how to do anything special like that...”

“You do. While you’re linked with the powered suit’s information controller, you can borrow the needed knowledge and skills.”

He shivered.

Before he knew it, Hamazura had learned how to do an emergency eject of the rocket fuel. It was less like he had memorized a thick book and more like he had learned how to ride a bicycle. In other words, the slow accumulation of “experiences” one gained after having practiced again and again had been overwritten into him in a concentrated manner.

He felt that life would be much easier if school lessons and studying road service skills were that easy. But it also scared him. He had no idea what could have been added to his head without him knowing. He decided that learning things on his own was best.

(I don't have time to think about this too much now.)

Hamazura consciously pushed away his questions and focused on the target ahead of him.

(I have a method to save Fremea. That's enough!!)

The auxiliary boosters were a type of arm and could change their angle depending on the situation. However, they were still primarily used to point back and provide propulsion and moving around parallel to the sides of the bike was as far as they went. They couldn't point forwards.

Which meant...

(I have to at least get next to him in order to get him wrapped up in the explosion!!)

That was when a change occurred with the movements of the 4-legged powered suit running ahead of him.

The back right leg suddenly moved as if it were kicking up like a horse.

Some lighting equipment had fallen to the ground and the suit was firing the remains back at Hamazura at high speed.

"...!!"

It was a hunk of metal with a weight of about 3 kilograms. He didn't know how durable Dragon Rider was, but he couldn't let any unnecessary loads destroy its balance.

He steered out of the way of the remains of the lighting equipment and between the pillars on the side of the track putting some horizontal distance between them. Dragon Rider was faster in pure speed. If there were no obstacles, getting alongside the powered suit would be simple.

But then Hamazura noticed something unusual.

Directly in front of him, a bright light came from the darkness.

(A subway train...!?)

A chill ran down Hamazura's spine.

A huge mass sped towards the Dragon Rider.

As the huge mass passed through the tunnel, it caused a great wind, a loud roar, and a violent vibration. The train operator must have seen him a moment before. The train braked and a horrible noise rang out as the metal wheels scraped along the rails, but it was too late. With a shower of sparks, the train slid another 300 meters.

The 4-legged powered suit calmly passed by to the side.

Perhaps because the powered suit was not a normal vehicle, it almost looked like joy over its pursuer being eliminated was radiating from the suit.

But then Silver Cross saw the large bike on the other side of the train through one of the gaps between cars.

It was the HsSSV-01 Dragon Rider.

Hamazura had stuck the bike in the tiny space between the subway train and the wall. He raced along at high speed just barely managing not to hit the wall.

As said before, the Dragon Rider was faster in pure speed than the 4-legged powered suit.

Now that the obstacle was gone and his opponent had let down his guard, there was no reason he couldn't catch up.

"Tch...!!"

Silver Cross decided to slam into the Dragon Rider himself.

In other words, he would use the difference in weight to knock his pursuer to the side.

But Hamazura was faster.

There was a difference between someone who immediately reacted and someone who was already prepared.

The auxiliary booster arm moved to the side and a large amount of rocket fuel was ejected. When it dispersed in a great wind, it scattered out a bit from the booster and created orange sparks.

There was less than a tenth of second between the ejection and the ignition.

The fuel exploded.

All sound was drowned out and a shock wave exploded out in what seemed like a transparent wall.

The left auxiliary booster got wrapped up the explosion it had caused and was torn from the Dragon Rider. The large bike that perfectly maintained its balance using electronic controls slid to the side oddly.

The 4-legged powered suit didn't get off easily.

It had been showered in the rocket fuel before the explosion. The explosion didn't manage to destroy the propeller blades, but the large suit was knocked a few meters to the side and it struck the tunnel wall. Orange sparks were created as the suit attempted to continue to run forward.

But something was wrong.

The damage from the extremely high heat and the shock wave had been too much to ignore. The two right legs weren't moving properly. They could still glide properly, but they had lost the function to alleviate the shocks by conforming to the land. If it continued to run like that, the great shocks would cause the internal workings of the suit to break.

"I see."

An unfamiliar man's voice suddenly reached Hamazura's ears.

It was a transmission.

"I was wondering how you managed to chase after me, but it seems the answer was simple. That isn't a bike made for powered suits to ride. The bike is part of the powered suit. That is one idea of how to overcome the joints in the human body. ...I never thought I would come across model from the same series."

That must have been why they were able to communicate.

As he controlled the large bike, Hamazura quietly but clearly spoke.

"You're going to give Fremea back."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll create another explosion."

Dragon Rider had lost one of its auxiliary boosters and some of its balance, but the 4-legged powered suit had even more damage and had lost some speed. The suit could no longer get away.

In response, Silver Cross gave a slight smile.

“I have the hostage with me. Do you not realize that I hold your victory in my hands?”

“You can’t do anything to her,” Hamazura plainly denied him. “That isn’t an automobile or a tank; it’s a powered suit. I don’t know how everything is divided up, but every movement of your arms and legs is directly linked to the powered suit’s movements. If you make any unnecessary movements in there, it will have an outward effect. If you really wanted to hurt Fremea, you would have to stop the powered suit and get out. In fact, you must have taken away her consciousness so her movements don’t have an outward effect. Am I wrong?”

The theory itself was Hamazura’s, but the foundation of knowledge supporting it came from elsewhere.

He didn’t even have time to consciously think about what he wanted to do. A deeper portion of his mind was read and the machine searched for the information in an offline database and put the needed knowledge in his brain.

How smoothly this process went and how much confidence in the accuracy of the information he had made him shiver, but he was in no position to worry about that.

“True,” briefly responded Silver Cross.

Even so, Hamazura didn’t think Silver Cross was just going to hand over Fremea. He had to have something else up his sleeve. Hamazura focused in all directions. He didn’t know how it worked internally, but the machine was most likely revising and amplifying this.

“It’s true that this isn’t a good situation. I’m at the disadvantage here. As such, I suppose I will ensure my own safety even if it requires changing my plans a little. ...Because of ‘them’, I can’t allow myself, one of the Freshmen, to be lost. Simply put, I am going to flee no matter what it takes. Luckily, this Life Armor gives me the durability to do just that.”

Immediately afterwards, the front hatch of the 4-legged suit opened and the small, armadillo-like suit came out.

Fremea was still inside the 4-legged suit.

And the suit was still moving along at over 500 kph.

“You...bastard!!” Hamazura yelled, but the armadillo had already curled up into a ball and moved in the opposite direction while it absorbed the shock.

The thick front hatch on the 4-legged suit closed again.

Without a pilot, the suit was sure to end up in a fatal accident eventually.

“Is this any time to be focusing on me? Out of respect for her determination, I removed the impromptu ‘chip’. But the Highway Cheetah doesn’t have 2 arms and 2 legs. She won’t be able to properly control it.”

Basically, he had awakened her so she would panic. He sounded like he was sneering in his transmission.

“I don’t like letting go of the line binding you and Accelerator, but having her die here will ‘settle’ that. The order is a bit different from the plan, but this will still lead to the upper levels of the city treating you Graduates as a target.”

“Fuck!!”

Focusing on the armadillo wasn’t going to help.

He had to get the 4-legged suit’s front hatch open and save Fremea as quickly as possible.

He didn’t know how the maintenance worker was monitoring him, but the worker spoke to him again.

“Your suit’s arms are just made to control the bike. They aren’t strong enough to force open the hatch.”

“Then what am I supposed to do!? Are you saying I just watch!?”

“Scrape it off.”

The maintenance worker’s response was brief but precise.

Even more so than the computer that supplied knowledge and experience to Hamazura.

“The 4-legged suit is being pressed up against the wall, right? Push it diagonally so that the edge of the hatch contacts the wall and keep it like that. If it looks like it’s going to leave the wall, just kick it back or something. Even if the bolts holding the hatch on are made of tungsten alloy, the hatch should be scraped off after about 7 kilometers of that.”

“...!!”

Hamazura readjusted the Dragon Rider's throttle to match the suit's speed and followed the instructions. Without Silver Cross at the controls and with the suit's sliding characteristic, turning it diagonally was simple. It continued forward even in that state.

The 4-legged suit had been contacting the wall that whole time and it was both making a horrible scraping noise and creating a large band of orange sparks. However, its legs that maintained its balance were acting oddly. They began to move up and down unnaturally.

(I guess it can't deal with the unevenness of the ground anymore.)

The powered suit shook greatly.

With no pilot, that slight movement was enough to make the suit begin to leave the wall.

Still straddling the Dragon Rider, Hamazura used one leg to forcefully kick the body of the suit. The push from the bottom of his foot moved the giant suit back to the tunnel wall.

The tremendous scraping noise continued.

(It's working.)

He had no proof, but Hamazura was sure. It may have been due to knowledge he was being given from outside.

The bolts holding the hatch closed would scrape off soon. Then he could rescue Fremea from within.

But then something unexpected happened.

One of the legs that had gotten caught in the explosion from the auxiliary booster suddenly sank down. It was reminiscent of a shoulder dislocating. The large explosion and the vibrations caused by the continued contact with the wall had greatly damaged the machinery within.

Its balance suffered greatly.

Hamazura couldn't support it on his own.

In order to avoid being taken down with it, he temporarily moved the Dragon Rider away. The joints for the front and back right legs broke and began dragging across the ground. The suit continued on creating tons of sparks along the ground and the ends of the legs stopped making contact with the ground.

If that slowed the suit down, it was a good thing.

Since the ends of the legs weren't contacting the ground, it would decelerate to a certain extent. Even if the suit didn't come to a complete stop, Fremea would be safe if it slowed down enough that it could safely run into a wall.

But then...

(You've gotta be kidding me....!!)

As Hamazura watched, the tough hatch began shaking unnaturally. The vibrations had scraped away the armor and it was clear the thick bolts were about to break.

The hatch was going to open and Fremea Seivelun would be thrown out.

The suit had finally started to decelerate, but it was still going somewhere between 300 and 400 kph.

If a flesh-and-blood human fell out of there, they would be pulverized like a shredded radish.

"Fuck that!!" yelled Hamazura as he opened up Dragon Rider's throttle again.

His only option to save Fremea was to get on the 4-legged suit himself.

He brought the bike right up the front right leg of the shaking suit. He grabbed the leg's armor with his hand and slowly stood up from his seat.

If he moved over to the suit, he would lose the bike.

He hesitated for an instant, but soon made up his mind.

He grabbed the leg with both hands and moved his legs from the bike to the suit as it continued on at high speed.

Having lost its driver, the bike fell to its side and got caught between the ground and the back right leg of the suit. A tremendous amount of orange sparks flew out.

Hamazura moved across the armor on the front right leg.

He was moving towards the front of the suit.

He was moving towards the one place where the four legs connected.

(Please make it in time...)

Hamazura forcefully grabbed the handle on the hatch.

Normally, he would have had no chance of opening it.

However, the thick bolts holding it shut were about to break.

“Open, damn you!!”

He used all the strength of the suit he was wearing and he heard something break within the 4-legged suit.

The front hatch opened wide.

If he hadn’t done anything, Fremea would have fallen out and onto the ground.

But Hamazura was waiting in front of the hatch and caught her small body in one arm.

They had only been separated for about half an hour, but he felt relief strong enough to take the strength from his entire body at their reunion.

“...!? Wh-what!? In the first place, what is—!?”

Fremea couldn’t see his face, so she must have thought he was someone suspicious.

(...Well, at least I kept her from falling to the ground. Now I just have to hold on until the suit stops.)

That was when a new problem occurred.

The engine that moved the propeller that provided the 4-legged suit’s speed started spewing black smoke.

It was probably due to the explosion or the vibrations afterwards.

It was also possible it was a self-destruct function.

Either way, he couldn’t wait around for the suit to slow down now that it might blow up.

“God damn it...”

However, the suit was still moving at 300 or 400 kph.

The Dragon Rider suit might have been able to withstand it, but Fremea wouldn’t make it. If he fell to the ground with her, he would pulverize her.

“What the hell am I supposed to do!?”

Part 16

Accelerator had landed at the entrance to the subway tunnel.

Just a few minutes before, his feet hadn't been touching the ground. He had created 4 whirlwinds on his back and been using their power to fly with tremendous speed.

However, he couldn't use that power inside the tunnel because of its strong electromagnetic interference.

He had only lost a few minutes, but that had to be a pretty major loss given the speed of the powered suit he was after.

(He has to exit the tunnel somewhere, but there are too many options. A lot of subway lines use this tunnel, so he could move to almost any part of the city through there.)

Accelerator could "fly" along the shortest course ignoring speed and road layout, so he had the option of randomly going to each of the possible exits, but that would eat up his battery. His power would be his greatest trump card when it came down to rescuing Fremea Seivelun. He couldn't deny that using it all up on the problem currently before his eyes could lead to worsening the situation down the road.

He thought for a bit and then pulled out his cell phone.

He called Misaka Worst.

"How's that brat doing?"

"Misaka supposes that is the first thing her father would ask, isn't it? We've made it back to the apartment. We're being questioned by Yomikawa, the landlady."

Yomikawa was part of Anti-Skill and she was the type of person that would act beyond what the manual said. She may have caught a glimpse of the problem on her own despite the darkness attempting to control the information.

"Have you seen any sign of the Freshmen?"

"Two groups of four. But they didn't feel like the main force. They were most likely just lookouts. Perhaps they were planning on abducting their targets for some psychological warfare in case you worked a little too hard and got in the way of their plan. But Misaka already took them out."

"Set up sensors and cameras around the area and prepare a number of escape routes, but don't let on that anything's wrong. If you try to move to a hideout unprepared, they'll target you en route and you can't let Yomikawa catch on. If those two groups are

still alive, threaten them with a knife. Make sure they keep reporting that nothing's wrong at their designated intervals."

"Is that all? Misaka has already done all that. She tied them up in a sheltered area with their radios and remote traps next to their mouths. Misaka may not look it, but she's the type who finishes her summer homework early."

Accelerator ignored her joke.

"...While somehow not letting Yomikawa or the others pick up on what's going on, I need you to get all the information you can on the 3rd shared subway tunnel. The powered suit that abducted that brat called Fremea Seivelun is running through there and I want to know what exit he's going to come out of."

"Somehow, huh? How far can Misaka go? Is punching them out an option?"

"..."

"Hey, don't get all silent on Misaka. Fine, fine, Misaka gets it. She'll hide it with peaceful means." Misaka Worst's voice was devoid of tension and it made one imagine that she had a smile in her eyes. "But is which exit he's going to come out of really enough? You know full well that the darkness we're from is merciless. It's possible he'll give it all a bloody end while he's still in the tunnel."

"No one can deal with 100% of the possibilities. In fact, the odds I would fail if I just blindly charged into the tunnel are quite high. Also, a different powered suit on a bike went into the tunnel after I got there. If it's who I think it is, the bastard won't give him a chance to touch Fremea."

"Oh, you're relying on someone else? How rare." Misaka Worst's words were filled with sarcasm. "But then wouldn't it be faster to directly ask the guy in the tunnel what's going on?"

"Do you really think we exchanged numbers?"

"Don't we just have to get his number some other way then?"

"Don't focus on that. It's possible the signal won't reach him in the tunnel. It's better to have multiple sources of information."

"You're free to order Misaka around, but surely you'll be working on gathering information too, right?"

The strained atmosphere continued until he hung up.

Fighting wasn't simply rampaging around.

Getting a grasp of the state of things was part of the fight.

Part 17

As Silver Cross Alpha headed into the depths of the tunnel's darkness while wearing the powered suit with the armadillo-like armor, he heard an explosion.

He chuckled and exited to the surface through one of the exits for construction workers instead of one of the subway stations.

Obviously, his suit had been a military secret. There were measures to take once it was severely damaged and about to fall into the hands of the enemy. The important bits of machinery and circuits were dissolved with a strong acid and then the suit was detonated by igniting its fuel.

A screen in the armadillo suit displayed the level of damage to the 4-legged suit.

It wasn't to the extent of that large bike with its jet engine and rocket boosters, but Silver Cross's 4-legged suit didn't use normal gasoline. And its fuel had been completely ignited.

The suit most likely no longer had its original form.

It wouldn't have very many properly functioning circuits left and the icons for ways to dispose of them to keep them from being captured were lined up on his screen.

(It's over.)

Silver Cross's genuine feelings leaked out.

(The only question is whether Hamazura Shiage died along with Fremea Seivelun or not. Even if they both died, Accelerator can still easily be made a big enough threat to require immediate action. If we just stir up Mugino or Kinuhata of Item and have them contact Accelerator, it should work.)

Silver Cross started to open a communications line connected to Kuroyoru Umidori in order to report what had happened.

Before he could, he froze.

He had seen something.

He saw it remotely through one of the camera lenses on the 4-legged powered suit that wasn't functioning properly anymore.

A figure was standing in the blaze.

That figure was holding a small girl in his arms.

"Hamazura Shiage...!!"

Silver Cross hadn't realized something.

Hamazura had stood on the Dragon Rider bike that had been caught between the 4-legged suit's broken back right leg and the ground. He then used all his strength to lift up the broken leg a few centimeters and had partly surfed on the bike as it separated from the 4-legged suit.

But Silver Cross couldn't believe it.

(How? How did he survive? And that's Fremea Seivelun. Unlike Hamazura, she didn't have the benefit of any armor!!)

He wanted to get more details on the figure standing in the flames and the 4-legged suit wasn't any help, so he directly connected his armadillo-like suit with a cable to the subway's security network so he could use the security cameras.

That backfired on him.

"You're there, aren't you?"

A voice stabbed into him.

A gaze turned in his direction.

The image on the monitor and the voice coming from the speakers accurately pierced straight through Silver Cross.

(Did he compute it from the communications equipment in both the powered suits? No, that isn't it. This is...!!)

A cable was stretching from Hamazura's arm as he stared directly at the lens of the security camera Silver Cross was using.

He had stood in front of the security camera for show and spread out his electronic “net” and then waited for Silver Cross to make his move.

Of course, this was beyond the level of a mere delinquent.

But Silver Cross knew that the missing knowledge and skills would be forcibly reinforced giving the boy the proper level of experience.

He brought his hand to the spinal area of the armadillo.

(...He’s getting mind support from the powered suit just like me!!)

It was all temporary. Once he left the powered suit, he would lose it all. But as long as he continued to wear the suit, that knowledge and those skills were his to use as he pleased.

The figure in the flames moved.

Another person appeared who must have entered the tunnel either through a subway station or through a construction entrance like the one Silver Cross had exited through. It wasn’t Accelerator. It appeared to be the delinquent that had been used to track down Hamazura and Fremea when they were hiding in the private salon.

Hamazura handed Fremea to the boy.

She was alive and, if she was handed over, Silver Cross and Kuroyoru’s plan would end a failure.

But he didn’t have time to worry about that.

He had something else to think about that took priority.

He had to survive.

When had he ended up in a situation where he had to seriously consider that?

“...I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what I’m going to do.”

With those words, the security camera was destroyed and the image was replaced with static.

At the same time, the voice transmission cut off.

In that instant, the positions of chased and chaser were reversed.

Part 18

Takitsubo Rikou, a girl wearing a pink jersey, was standing blankly in front of a roadside vending machine.

She wasn't just holding a normal drink can in her hand. She had the authorized iced tea of a famous tea shop. At least it claimed to be. It had a lot of milk, sugar, and honey put in by default, so the flavor had been lost. Its sweetness was on the level of strawberry milk.

(...My feet hurt. I'm tired of walking.)

Takitsubo was there for a very simple reason.

The three members of Item were still on the Hamazura Search that they had made the humiliating bunny bet on, but, unlike Mugino and Kinuhata, Takitsubo had no real basis with which to search for Hamazura. And since she had the ability to sense others' AIM diffusion fields, she gave her "intuition" a lot more importance than she herself thought.

To fully use her power, she had to use the Body Crystal powder that had powerful side effects, but she could still vaguely sense the weak power that espers subconsciously emitted even without it. However, since it was just a vague sense, she couldn't tell what kind of power it was, who was using it, or where they were. It really wasn't that useful.

As such, the "invisible power" that was backing her up, the thing that her actions were based on in the end, was really just vague and uncertain "intuition".

Since she had managed to make it through Academy City's darkness safely with that intuition, it might have been something worth researching.

"Nn..."

Takitsubo looked vacantly up into the air.

(A signal is coming from the north east...That way, I think.)

Then her cell phone started ringing.

While she walked along the street, she took her phone out of her pocket with her small hand.

It was from Kinuhata Saiai.

"Yahoh. Have you super found Hamazura yet?"

"Nnn."

“Mugino ran into a problem with controlling the security company and getting video data got super hard for her, so I guess I’m going to be super first.”

“Kinuhata, do you know where Hamazura is?”

“Well, yeah.” The voice coming from the phone dropped a tone. “But I spotted someone super annoying nearby.”

Part 19

Incidentally, Silver Cross Alpha’s face had been burned as a punishment in the past.

He had experienced firsthand how useless the nonsense about what is inside a person being important was.

Ever since it had happened, he had spent his life attempting to regain his face. As he completed various “jobs”, various bits of Academy City technology had been used to repair his face bit by bit as if it were a lump of clay having details added. It was like a horrible game of fukuwarai[3].

But he realized something when he had finally regained his former graceful face.

Even though so much money and technology had been used to perfectly bring back his face, the disgrace he felt when his face had been burnt away continued to warp his looks into something unsightly.

Consequently, Silver Cross fundamentally had no sense of aesthetics towards his own body.

His habit of switching between numerous powered suits was largely due to the fact that he had arranged his mind so he held no attachment to his outer appearance, his features, or his form.

To control a 4-legged powered suit, he had to become a 4-legged animal.

To control an 8-legged powered suit, he had to become an 8-legged animal.

Even if some of the controls were left to a program leaving simplified controls for him to use, in the end, that was what was required to truly control a powered suit. In fact, getting used to everything going smoothly due to the program made the problem worse.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fukuwarai

Obviously, the behavior required to control an 8-legged form with a 2-legged form were of no use when walking with your own two legs. If he got used to the method for 8-legged walking, he would forget how to walk with 2 legs and his commands would be thrown into confusion.

And that's just talking about the legs.

It should be clear how severe the problem would be once it spread to the entire body.

What is the true form of my body? How do I move it?

Everyone knew those things and had no problem with the answers and Silver Cross could analyze those things in his mind each time. He overcame the reason that power suits beyond the shape of a human hadn't become mass produced.

That man who had abandoned his own body had a sudden thought.

He was watching the man who stood up amid the burning flames holding Fremea Seivelun.

He was looking at that scene and the spot the man stood in.

He thought that he might not ever be able to stand in a place like that no matter what model of powered suit he used.

♦

Chasing him was simple.

Hamazura had lost the Dragon Rider bike, but it was still much easier to move in the powered suit than with nothing. He was running through the subway tunnel. He couldn't avoid the loss in stamina caused by moving his own limbs, but he was glad that he could move faster than the speed limit on those two legs.

Searching for him was simple.

He had used the powered suit's data to spread out an electronic "net" and Silver Cross had gotten caught in it. He wasn't far away. With his machine-assisted legs, Hamazura could catch up to him very soon.

Reading his movements was simple.

Silver Cross had two options at that point.

First, he could run away as quickly as he could, meet up with his comrades, and change into a more powerful suit. But he wouldn't choose that. The biggest weak point of a powered suit was in the instant of changing from one to another. Since he didn't know

when Hamazura would catch up to him, Hamazura doubted he would make contact with one of his mobile “bases”.

Therefore, Silver Cross would choose the other option.

He would give up on changing to a better suit and attempt to capture Fremea Seivelun as quickly as he could using his current armadillo-like suit. It was a self-evident truth that Fremea’s life could be used to keep Hamazura and Accelerator in check. And, using the security camera, Silver Cross had seen Hamazura in the powered suit hand Fremea over to Hanzou who didn’t have a suit. He also knew that Hamazura had split up from Hanzou and Fremea in order to chase after Silver Cross who was far away.

Silver Cross was sure to think this was his last chance.

If he could sneak past Hamazura, attack the defenseless Hanzou, and abduct Fremea, he could still turn the situation around.

Because of this, getting a surprise attack on him was simple.

Silver Cross was certain to use the tunnel again in order to get Fremea back as quickly as possible. And since he wanted to sneak past Hamazura, he wouldn’t use the shortest path.

He needed a path that was a detour but still allowed him to get Fremea back as quickly as possible.

He would be second.

Once Hamazura had worked all that out, he just had to wait for Silver Cross to arrive in his armadillo-like suit.

With a crash, Hamazura jumped from cover and struck the back of the armadillo with a flying kick.

The armadillo was knocked to the ground and bounced five or six times. The model finally stopped when it struck the gently curving wall and then slowly stood up.

He had succeeded in his surprise attack, but Hamazura still felt impatient.

(...I used the best timing and hit him with all my weight when he was off guard and he can still move. He really is tough.)

The armadillo had unhesitatingly jumped out of the 4-legged suit that was running at over 500 kph and it still kept its normal specs. It must have been guaranteed to protect the life of its controller. It didn’t seem like it was just that its armor was tough. It may have also had some kind of electronic control mechanism that let it escape the shock.

Hamazura was wearing the control suit for Dragon Rider, a crystallization of “official” technology that had originally been created as a large Anti-Skill patrol bike.

Silver Cross was wearing a part of his collection that was a crystallization of the technology of the dark side of the city.

They each had to defeat the other and they stared each other down.

The control suit and the armadillo suit did not exchange words.

The first step was taken before they could.

Their fists crossed.

A loud creaking noise rang out.

It wasn’t the sound of a flesh-and-blood body being hit. But it wasn’t simply the sound of the powered suits’ armor striking each other.

Hamazura’s right fist had parried Silver Cross’s fist.

He had struck Silver Cross’s lower arm from the outside to forcibly alter the trajectory of his fist.

Hamazura threw a punch with his left fist in response.

It was an uppercut.

The armadillo purposefully moved its shoulder towards the fist in order to keep the damage as low as possible.

Of course, these weren’t Hamazura Shiage’s techniques.

Nor were they Silver Cross’s.

The computers inside the powered suits were searching for knowledge and skills and reinforcing the two of them. They were using that to its fullest in this exchange of punches that were stronger than a standard shotgun. They were predicting their opponent’s moves, calculating the trajectories of their fists, parrying, and then beginning their own attack. And this process was being carried out at a speed of 3 times a second.

The motors and chemical springs were correcting their fists’ momentum vectors to create destructive forces on the level of a gun.

As Silver Cross was controlling a weapon in the shape of a human instead of a machine that reinforced human actions, he could most likely produce the most destructive force.

The noises of strong blows and sparks flying continued on and on.

(...Just plowing our tough armor into each other isn't going to do anything. Both these suits were created to be indestructible. A frontal attack is just a waste of time.)

Hamazura was thinking while he controlled the suit that was amplifying his fist to the point that it could plow right through a car door.

(But these aren't tanks or armored cars. They're just powered suits that match the movements of the body within and amplify the momentum. That's a weakness I can use to stop his movements.)

In other words, he had to stop the soft human inside not the tough powered suit on the outside.

Hamazura didn't bother to avoid the armadillo suit's fists while it was focusing on his face most likely in an attempt to destroy the sensors there. Hamazura restrained Silver Cross's arm by wrapping his two arms around it.

The arm of a powered suit was different from the arm of a mere machine. A human arm was inside the powered suit arm.

That meant if one used his weight to break the arm at the shoulder and elbow, the human arm within would break, too.

Of course, Hamazura wasn't versed in joint locks.

He didn't know how to break someone's joint when they were still standing and on their guard.

It was all due to the machine's reinforcement.

It felt like pushing a rail car and looking down the rail.

His limbs moved quickly and he broke his opponent's arm more calmly than he normally would have been in that situation.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!"

"Judo and wrestling sure are scary, huh? I wouldn't want to deal with them in a street fight with no referee!!"

A powered suit was made up of machines and could alter the degree of freedom its joints had. It may not even break if it was bent completely backwards.

But the human arm inside was different.

And since the powered suit operated by matching the movements of the human, an injury to the human greatly decreased the types of orders that could be given to it.

(I don't need to break both of his arms and both of his legs. If I can just break one leg, he won't be able to move anymore...!!)

That was when he heard an odd noise.

The right arm of the armadillo suit that Hamazura had supposedly broken began to shake unnaturally.

It was as if it was changing modes of some kind.

"Don't underestimate meeeeeeeeee!"

"!?"

Silver Cross used the power of his left hand to tear off the portion below the elbow of the broken right arm that Hamazura was still grabbing.

Hamazura lost his balance and Silver Cross delivered a strong kick to his gut.

Hamazura's back struck the concrete wall and thin cracks raced along the wall.

"Gah!?"

Then came a second hit.

And a third.

"...!!!!!!"

Even while wearing a powered suit, it was enough to knock the wind out of him. As he was struggling to breathe, he let go of the armadillo suit's right arm.

That wasn't normal.

Of course, an attack like that would damage Hamazura, but the pain of having one's arm ripped off should have been greater. It wouldn't have been surprising if someone bit their tongue in shock when it happened.

Hamazura looked straight ahead with his dim vision and saw something unusual regarding the armadillo suit.

Its armor was crumbling away as if it were mud.

"...You were wrong if you thought you could stop a powered suit by breaking its 'contents'."

Some kind of viscous black oil and something like a belt-shaped piece of rubber stretched out and began wrapping around the arm that had fallen to the ground. Then the supposedly severed arm was forcibly reattached from the outside. It looked more like a black arm with a captivating unevenness to it than it did armor.

(...It's just like a crab's shell. He used the shell to connect the torn off arm...!)

As the armor left his face, Silver Cross's voice became clearer.

His voice was as beautiful as a bell.

"Once a powered suit goes past a certain point, it essentially becomes the same as a cyborg. It's just the difference between being reinforced from without or from within."

With a water-like sound, Silver Cross's "shell" transformed. Inside was a young man with long hair and a graceful face. The "shell" changed so that it looked like he was wearing a dirty cape.

He didn't look at all like the robot surrounded by thick armor that had been there before.

Half of Silver Cross's body was covered in the artificial muscles that forcibly reinforced him from without, but they looked like a half complete design.

The writhing fibers of the chemical springs were directly visible.

On that somehow captivating unevenness, the model name, Emergency, was displayed in red letters.

"Therefore, destroying the body inside is pointless. It can still be reinforced by the shell. If you destroy the bones and muscles of my arms and legs, destroy my blood vessels so I lose blood, or even damage or stop my internal organs, the suit can bypass all of that and allow me to continue to fight. Even..."

A noise that sounded like creaking gears could be heard and a number of long and thin but warped arms with pointed ends shot out of the part of his right side of his body that was covered by the cape.

"My brain."

A chill ran down Hamazura's spine.

His knowledge and skills were being supplemented by the computer.

"...This power was supposed to be for using against 'them', so of course it isn't going to be something normal"

Hamazura didn't know how much damage the suit could bypass, but the fight had clearly gone beyond the point of a battle between two flesh-and-blood humans. The battle could no longer be settled by putting a bullet between his opponent's eyes.

"Realize that and then we can enjoy this. I'll show you just how repulsive it is to go beyond being human."

♦

In actuality, Silver Cross's tactic had begun before he had changed the suit's silhouette, before the armadillo-like suit's right arm had been torn off, and even before the fistfight on the level of shotgun blasts had begun.

It had started the instant he had been hit by the surprise flying kick.

It came down to a difference in experience. Silver Cross Alpha had been using all sorts of powered suits for a long period of time, so he knew what was important in a powered suit battle and he knew what to do to defeat an enemy when they showed up.

He knew the most important thing.

It wasn't the armor or exterior joints and it wasn't the battery or the motors either. There was something that had to be grasped first before those surface things.

(The reinforcing and supplementing of knowledge and skills by the computer.)

No matter how strong the punch, it was meaningless if it didn't hit. No matter how solid the armor, it was meaningless if an attack could get through a gap.

(Neither of us are experts in battle or in martial arts. The readjusted thoughts calculate the most effective attack pattern based on your level of experience. ...So if you can figure out what the reinforcement script is, you can pull of a cross counter with 100% accuracy.)

For that reason, Silver Cross had put the camera mode to high speed and started analyzing from the second the battle began. He was fighting Hamazura and having the computer work at the same time.

And he had gotten an answer.

The infinite possibilities had been narrowed down to finite options.

Obviously, Hamazura Shiage had an almost infinite number of attack patterns he could freely use. But he only had 5 patterns for a first move. Silver Cross was preemptively crushing the explosively spreading possibilities that were held in 0.1 seconds. If he created a situation where he could pull off a cross counter for every single first move, his victory would be assured. That was why he had changed his suit's silhouette. The 7 warped arms with pointed ends were prepared to pierce through a gap in Hamazura's armor at the armpit and into his lungs and heart and to also destroy the computer on his back. The arms were prepared to do this for every move Hamazura could take.

Hamazura did not realize this.

That was why he took the last step forward to attack Silver Cross.

He had no idea that act would lead to his chest being pierced.

(...So he's going for the barrier of pursuing destructive power.)

Hamazura was in a cage called possibility.

His future was a dead end.

(Come face your prepared death, Level 0!!)

A dull noise rang out.

It was the dull noise of a human body being destroyed through the gaps in the joints of a powered suit.

In that instant, the 7 pointed arms had accurately captured all 5 possible first moves. They were to intercept every single one of Hamazura's possible actions, pierce his heart, and destroy the computer controlling his powered suit so it couldn't bypass his heart.

And yet Hamazura slipped past them.

The 7 arms missed.

Hamazura sent his fist at Silver Cross Alpha with tremendous force in an attack that wasn't any of the preset 5 first moves.

(Wha—?)

Silver Cross's breath caught, but then he realized what had happened.

(He turned off the computer reinforcement at the last second to go beyond its breadth of options.)

"...!?"

He immediately swung the 7 arms in, but it was too late.

Those weapons had been deployed so that they could apply their maximum destruction within the range he had set. They weren't going to intercept Hamazura successfully now that he had left that range.

The pointed ends lightly tore at Hamazura's suit.

But that was all they did.

They didn't stop him from moving and the fist that could plow straight through a car door slammed into Silver Cross.

Hamazura rotated the strike to the side and hit Silver Cross's torso.

It hit the battery and the computer.

A grating noise was heard and all of Silver Cross's movable parts stopped. His state-of-the-art weapon had become nothing more than expensive shackles.

"...So you..." Silver Cross couldn't move his arms and legs and he was stuck bent over forward. He could only just barely move his mouth. "...read that I was reading your attack pattern..."

"What the hell are you talking about?" spat out Hamazura in response. He still truly didn't know what Silver Cross had been trying to do. "I just realized that this was something I had to do on my own."

Part 20

Silver Cross Alpha had been defeated.

He seemed to still be conscious, but his control computer had been destroyed, so all of his joints had frozen up and he couldn't even take off the suit himself. He was trapped inside the partially collapsed suit.

Hamazura checked to make sure of that and then leaned his back up against the tunnel wall. He gave a sigh of relief.

The last half hour had been intense.

A horrible sweat caused by the danger he had been in was still coming from his entire body.

“Hamazura!!” Hanzou came running over from farther down the dark tunnel. “Are you okay?”

“Somehow or other...” As he spoke, Hamazura opened and closed the powered suit’s hands. “But this suit is shot. It can’t amplify the momentum of my actions anymore and its thought reinforcement is based on having that power. If I tried to follow what it told me to do, I would just end up destroying my bones. ...It’s really just a riding suit now.”

He was just glad that it hadn’t frozen up like Silver Cross’s suit had. And it was still tougher than normal clothes even if it couldn’t amplify the momentum of his actions.

He took off the helmet and breathed the air directly before asking a question.

“Where’s Fremea?”

“Nearby. It seems she mistook you for a transforming superhero.”

“Hey, if I could get away with anything just by having my face hidden, I’d give it a try.”

They heard a creaking noise and turned their eyes towards the darkness.

Deep in the dark subway tunnel, they heard a slight noise. It wasn’t a natural noise. It sounded something like the creaking of a thick spring.

Hamazura put his helmet back on and switched it to night vision mode. He stopped breathing once he did.

“...Oh, fuck...”

“What is it, Hamazura? What can you see?”

Masses of metal.

Crawling legs.

Cold lenses.

“Powered suits.”

“Didn’t you just defeat the powered suit guy!?”

“This isn’t just 2 or 3. There are more than 10 of the damn things. It wasn’t just Silver Cross!!”

“So that’s it...” muttered Silver Cross while he was still frozen in place inside the broken suit. His voice was tinged with self-derision. “That girl is sending my collection out of my hangar without my permission.”

Looking at the threat, Hamazura took a step back and Hanzou moved even further back pushed by an imagined fear of what he couldn't see. Then the two started running. The relief and sense of release from before was gone.

"Let's meet up with Fremea! You said she was nearby, right!?"

"I left her with Kuruwa. She has a hideout nearby, so let's head there! But we can't deal with a bunch of powered suits like that. What are we going to do, Hamazura!?"

"That should be obvious..."

He couldn't use his suit anymore.

The enemy kept sending in more and more forces making their strength seem infinite.

The end was nowhere in sight.

How far did they have to run? Could they continue to run? Was running even the right thing to do?

Hamazura was being chased again, but he stared ahead and gave his answer.

"We have to forestall them in order to save Fremea!!"

Between the Lines 4

They would temporarily paralyze the city's communications so reports couldn't be sent to Anti-Skill or Judgment and then attack as a group to incapacitate the targets on a list of dangerous espers.

The plan was moving ahead nicely. Skill-Out was made up of a number of groups, but they had been contacted and each one had approved of the plan.

People, money, materials. Komaba and the boys and girls around him could tell they had gathered enough of those things to carry out the plan and they rejoiced.

But, at the same time, Komaba Ritoku had a thought: It won't be that easy.

Even if they surrounded the powerful espers with large numbers, it didn't guarantee that they could defeat them. And defeating them once didn't guarantee that they would be incapacitated. Most importantly, they were causing the battle between Level 0s and espers to spread even further. Also, the higher ups of Academy City were powerful enough to keep the city running and they would probably take actions to obstruct Komaba and the others' plan.

Another step was needed.

He needed to create a situation where the attacks on Level 0s would stop whether the plan succeeded or failed and no matter what other result it brought.

But he couldn't come up with such a step.

While he was trying to do so, it all began.

The higher ups of Academy City had sent the worst possible assassin to stop Skill-Out's plan. He was known as Accelerator. He was Academy City's strongest Level 5. He was fighting to protect the city from a completely different angle than Komaba.

After seeing him and fighting with him, Komaba Ritoku finally smiled slightly in his heart.

He had found that last step.

He had found the final piece needed to solve the problem of the Level 0s being attacked whether the plan succeeded or failed.

I win.

That was the last thing he muttered in his heart towards Academy City when the battle ended.

He was thankful that he had been fortunate enough to come across someone he could entrust his feelings to.

CHAPTER 5

Even If He Does Not Become a Hero.

Knight(s).

Part 1

Kuroyoru Umidori was standing on the roof of the apartment.

If she used her ability, her movement wouldn't be affected even if there were no roads. Though she couldn't fly straight like a plane, it was convenient enough if she was just moving from one roof of a building to another.

She was heading towards her 'workplace'.

The underlings of the Freshmen had tracked down Hamazura and Fremea, and had confirmed that they were hidden inside the abandoned building.

They only stopped midway through because Kuroyoru realized that the phone in her hand was ringing.

With only the hood of her white coat hanging on her head, Kuroyoru Umidori grabbed the phone. She placed the inflatable dolphin doll beside her feet and stepped on it, making squishy sounds.

"Yes, that's right. Bring over the 'hidden treasure' from where Silver Cross is. It's the critical moment now. That guy is already useless. It's a waste of money to save that treasure. It's time for them to show their stuff."

The one on the other side of the phone was someone working under Silver Cross. The person was in charge of activating the powered suit.

"Under automatic control, the movements will become abnormally simple, it's extremely easy for the enemy to see through."

"It's alright if the enemy does not have enough firepower to pierce armor. We can rely on numbers here...besides, if we don't use that thing, the treasure will rust."

"....."

“With science continuing to advance, this is the perfect specimen for a basic standard in ‘cutting-edge technology’. This is facing us Freshmen. If you understand that, hurry up and send it in. As for Silver Cross, no need to care about what he likes, just send it.”

“But that model is...”

“I see, that’s the only one without a completely automated AI, right? Is that a unique attribute of a powered suit? It feels like a computer driver that inputs specified algorithm into a human brain to increase the capability.”

Kuroyoru pondered for a while,

“Well, can’t be helped.”

“So are we not firing the Five Over?”

“On the contrary. Stuff the dead Silver Cross inside Five Over. That can act as the algorithm code, we just need a neural code.”

Such cold words.

As if it wanted to crush all rhetoric.

“Then, let’s confirm it. Most of the powered suits are automated. With Silver Cross inside, Five Over will be activated through the pre-installed procedure...since it doesn’t have a consciousness. And under automatic control, the movements of that thing will be extremely simple. Also, we can’t execute the minor adjustments and complex battle operations. In other words...”

“So you can’t guarantee whether Fremea Seivelun will remain alive?”

Kuroyoru snorted.

“No problem, it’s alright to kill her. The higher ups have already assumed that Hamazura Shiage has some sort of contact with Accelerator, and that there’s a power formed. That kiddo’s mission is complete. Even if we kill her, I won’t be required to bear responsibility...hurry up and settle it so that we can deal with ‘them’.”

She hung up the phone and reached for a chocolate bar from the pocket inside of her coat. It was the kind advertised to be able to replace a breakfast.

(And, so, now, we managed to go all this way for Hamazura and Fremea. The main point is still Accelerator, huh?)

She ate the little chocolate chip snack that was mixed with honey and whipped cream.

(Though that guy's reflection can resist a nuke's attack, the principle behind it is just a simple operation of vectors. There was this example of one guy in the past that used this attribute to pull his attack back right before the punch connected, and used reflection to attack Accelerator directly...and right now, through the Dark May Project, I can do a bit of that thinking process. In other words, I got the timing in my mind.)

Thinking about this, Kuroyoru inadvertently looked up.

"Really...this is too sweet. This is already way past the amount of sugar the brain needs for daily activities. Isn't this making a fool of a health brand?"

As she said this, she deliberately amplified her voice, obviously trying to let someone hear it.

"We seemed to be brushing past each other nowadays. How about trying this? I say, whether it's eating or waiting for someone, it's troubling when no one appears when you need them, isn't it?"

Smirking, Kuroyoru turned her head around.

"Kinuhata Saiai-chan?"

Hearing her words, Kinuhata wordlessly walked forward.

She was not holding anything in her small two hands, but for her, the most reliable things in a battle were her bare hands. Those slender wrists contained 'power' capable of lifting a car.

"Really, to meet a troublesome person just as I was super looking for Hamazura. I suppose you super understand why I came here."

"The timing's not too good, but I'm grateful that you're able to come here. This explains that complicated network of yours. It's good to be able to get this 'Item' that you and Mugino and company formed, since you're related to Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage. We got a famous 'large group', and as the higher-ups have specially ordered, it's about time to exterminate."

"You can super do whatever you want, I—"

"Kinuhata-chan."

Kuroyoru's voice of contempt overpowered whatever Kinuhata had to say. .

"I'm sorry, but I'm having fun talking to myself. Honestly, you don't have any privilege to speak up, you know? Privilege. You don't understand this simple word, do you?"

"Freshmen..."

Kinuhata inadvertently muttered.

“Are you so happy to join a new group?”

“I said it before already; I don’t expect to talk to you. Well, that’s about it. I’m not really happy or anything, just that I’m back to where I was before. This is where I should exist. So, I want to destroy, I want to kill.”

Kuroyoru wasn’t agitated at all.

There was nothing to hold her back.

“Though I say this, the adjustments that the higher-up made seemed to be forced by the situation. Why would ‘they’ take action? Oh yeah, this ‘they’ don’t refer to Hamazura Shiage or Accelerator and company. ‘They’ are a threat from outside...in other words, they’re people ‘with different laws from us’, so we can’t control them. For this, we reorganized ourselves. However, it’s unlikely for Kinuhata-chan to understand this when she didn’t get called up.”

“...A lousy student who can’t even get ‘marks’ still has the unwarranted problem of exaggerating what never happened.”

“Huh? Are you talking about the Dark May Project?”

Laughing and deriding it, Kuroyoru kicked the inflatable doll.

It was unknown what caused the dolphin to stick onto the back of her white coat.

Then,

“I’m an individual ‘closest’ to the element of attack. Well, since my power was so much that it overflowed, I ended up killing those researchers and caused the project to go bankrupt. To the ‘dogs’ that want to maintain in good condition, those were inferior students, isn’t that right, honor student Kinuhata-chan?”

Suddenly, her tone changed.

BOOM!! An explosion occurred.

Kuroyoru extended her arms out, and Bomber Lances 3m long each shoot out from her hands.

And seeing this, Kinuhata closed her eyes, and slowly opened them.

“...A super weak bastard who can only shoot from her palms, do you think that you can beat me?”

Her tone had changed.

It was as if she had lured all of the hidden violent side within Kuroyoru out.

There was no such gorgeous physical phenomenon as with Kuroyoru, but the nitrogen around Kinuhata did form a wall. If it was just the level of a lance attack, she could do a complete 360 degrees Offense Armor.

The common thing between them was the Dark May Project.

A plan that increased an esper's ability by implanting a portion of the calculation processes possessed by the strongest esper in Academy City.

In a certain sense, this project that trampled on anyone's personality at will had given these two girls power.

However, though their powers were of a similar kind, they were different.

They form an idealized version of the #1's calculation ability. When the mental parts of 'moving and excluding' were removed, the details of the abilities would also be different.

One was offensive.

The other was defensive.

These two were Level 4 espers that manipulated the nitrogen in the air, and there was a clear difference between Kuroyoru Umidori and Kinuhata Saiai.

But was that all?

Or were they already thinking of different things as they licked their wounds, right before their mindsets changed?

These two that had managed to survive through the nightmarish experiment didn't intend to talk to each other and look for a way to avoid violence.

It was just a frontal attack, total annihilation.

This was caused by the compressed nitrogen colliding with each other as Kinuhata and Kuroyoru had a frontal clash.

But in terms of offense, Kuroyoru had the advantage.

The right hand and the left hand; the Bomber Lances that shot out from both sides passed through the gap in Kinuhata's wrist and stabbed towards her chest and abdomen.

The thoroughly directed attack had enough force to pierce through a tank.

But having been hit by the direct attack, Kinuhata just took a deep breath, and laughed.

"...I'm super skilled in defense."

The Bomber Lances were deflected aside.

They had been deflected by the blocks of nitrogen surrounding Kinuhata's fists.

After that, it was a torrent of hits.

"Kinuhata-chan!"

Lances on one side, fists on the other. Looking at this, it was obvious that Kuroyoru had the advantage. Though Kinuhata's power was strong, she could only cover about several centimeters around her fists. In contrast, Kuroyoru's lances were 3m long. If Kinuhata's fists could be described to rival a close-ranged Gatling gun, then Kuroyoru's lances were like miniature rapid-fire cruise missiles. The biggest output of the attack wasn't the piercing ability, but the explosion as it aimed to turn the landscape into a mountain of rubble. However, since she was only in the development phase, it was very hard for Kuroyoru to control it even though she specialized in attack.

However,

"Super pitiful."

Putting down the fists that could crush a car into scrap metal, Kinuhata snorted.

"The moment you couldn't kill me, the winner was already decided. My defense is 360 degrees all-around, and it activates automatically without me having to want it to. If you can't pierce through the armor, it's the same no matter how many times you try. No matter what the method is, or the angle, you won't even hurt my super soft eyeballs...the method of using a large amount of nitrogen to pierce through a target like wet paper can work if it were ordinary steel, but it's super weak when it goes up against my armor, since it's also made of nitrogen."

At the same time,

"You super focus on attack, completely ignoring defense at all, so all the power is gathered around your two hands. If your body is the super target, you can't possibly take a direct hit to your body, right? The super question of who has the advantage doesn't exist...how big of a difference, I'll tell you with these hands of mine."

Even if she understood, she wouldn't stop.

Even if she got attacked from all directions through different means, she was safe even if she didn't take action, since no hit would be fatal.

But Kinuhata Saiai would not stop until she crushed the enemy in front of her.

“Hihahaha, you haven’t changed at all, Kinuhata-chan.”

“Do you have any super change?”

“I do.”

While waving her hands, Kuroyoru however revealed a mocking expression, even though her hands were the only ones strengthened.

“I did I did I did, Kinuhata-chan. Actually, it’s more like I extremely intrigued that you’re still at this level. You should have changed, there were so many chances for you to do so, so why haven’t you changed at all? Why can’t you step out of the basic of basics that espers need to use powers to fight?”

“…”

“Do you think that an esper’s secrets is only about powers? About what power, what kind of attack pattern and what sort of weaknesses? Do you really think that understanding these will allow you to control the battle? This is already outdated. Let me repeat this, Kinuhata-chan. If you have the heart, you can change anytime you want. Just like me.”

Immediately, Kinuhata became alert, wary that Kuroyoru had another weapon other than her powers... for example, pistols or bombs.

In a certain sense, this was correct, and in another sense, it was wrong.

The result was this,

The inflatable plastic dolphin doll that was stuck on her white coat exploded.

A large number of arms extend out from within.

These arms climbed up Kuroyoru’s body, still attached on the upper right side of her body.

Though they were arms, they were as small as kids. In a certain sense, they were things that didn’t have any balance. But there were arms more than 1m long. The feeling was like polyethylene or a petroleum based product, and these hard and sturdy objects could actually move without ball joints, or that was the feeling that they gave. Skin that was colored like a human, glossy, hard and shiny like a man-made item. These contradicting terms completely collapsed.

The numerous hands with curved tube-like things attached to them seemed to follow Kuroyoru’s will as the palms were aimed at Kinuhata.

Of course, it couldn't be something learned in biology.

And then at the same time, Kinuhata remembered.

Kuroyoru Umidori was an esper who could fire Bomber Lances from her palms.

BOOOMM—!! A strong impactful explosion rang.

A large number of Bomber Lances were produced, and they all gathered at one spot. These transparent spears had great devastating power, and they sent Kinuhata, who was guarding herself with both arms, flying backwards several meters.

Kinuhata looked at the cuffs of her damaged sweater.

Unbelievably, her Offense Armor had been blown through.

"Artificial arms...armored...no, this super is not like it. This is...!?"

"A biochemical robot that goes past a certain level isn't much different from an armored unit, Kinuhata-chan. The reverse is true as well."

Clack clack, the numerous slender arms on Kuroyoru's body were moving about.

They were not complete tubes; there seemed to be several short bones attached, giving people a sick feeling of it being forcefully moved with all those fractures.

"You're sort of right when you mention that, but right now, they still haven't found a way to use processed metals to create humans, and they still need to use something organic. It'll be even more quaint if they use bacteria and other microorganisms to make the detailed parts. It'll be as scary as making bread without yeast."

"A man-made...enhanced, super esper, machine...!?"

"The latest model that just got renewed, you know. It seemed like the biological robot got enhanced with the research of a 'Kihara brand' and developed further."

A mocking laugh.

Even if it was established, this technology normally didn't have a reason to appear.

Too twisted.

It was so twisted that the highly corrupted higher ups would hide it for fear of social unrest.

"However, is this really something worth being shocked over? It was already hinted at a long time ago. Like that brain-crippled Accelerator using an external network to help

him calculate, Musujime Awaki using a low frequency therapy apparatus to stabilize her mind...there's no need to go deep into a person's part. The technology of transferring power from an external machine to a human body was already established. For me, it's the opposite. I'm not using an external power, just outputting my power to something artificial."

Kuroyoru Umidori was an esper who could fire Bomber Lances from her hands.

A human had only two hands, so she could only produce 2 lances.

Then, it was just a matter of increasing the number of hands.

When she increased the number by 10 or 20 and gathered all of them at a single spot, the damage would drastically increase.

"And then,"

The noisy atmosphere surrounded Kinuhata.

This wasn't created from a machine, but a 'presence' that a human had.

"My body can have as many as it wants. The things that are counted as 'mine' aren't just limited to 'these'."

On the four corners of the roof of the building.

Something crawled out from inside, and these things were like the 'hands' attached to Kuroyoru's body, a giant waterfall of slow moving snakes. Hundreds, thousands of them, all these machines were attached to Kuroyoru Umidori's single 'body', and had the capability of firing Bomber Lances.

"The hands hidden inside the dolphin are remote controls...attached to my body and work like an antenna. These slaves are normally controlled by specific programs, but now, they follow the signal given by the master, and thus becomes 'my body'. I suppose I don't need to explain what a slave is, right?"

Kuroyoru seemed like she was unable to hold back her laughter as she said,

"Now, what will you do next, Kinuhata-chan?"

"...!!"

"Your defense is of Accelerator's reflection, and my offence is of Accelerator's vector control. The lance's range is only 3m, but after overlapping with each other, I can create a larger, longer and more powerful lance that's so powerful that the destruction is unimaginable, do you know that?"

No matter whether they had any chance of winning, the situation of a battle was everchanging.

Kuroyoru Umidori didn't wait.

And Kinuhata Saiai didn't have time to think.

Several thousand shots were fired at the same time, causing the landscape of the roof to change drastically.

Kinuhata wanted to settle this with a punch, but she didn't have any space to move forward.

The lances that were able to cleave the entire rooftop sent Kinuhata's little body flying away.

Ch—DONG!! The sound of impact could be heard.

Kinuhata's body slammed into a water tank on a building several hundred meters away, and the large amount of water replaced the storm as it scattered all over the place.

Kuroyoru peered at the damaged water tank.

"Cheh. For some reason, my vision's getting rather bad...time to 'change' it. Well, I can't really tell, but with just this, she should be barely breathing."

Zozozozozo, a large number of 'hands' followed, and Kuroyoru stood on the edge of the roof in order to get over to the next building.

"Kinuhata-chan. I'm going to kill everyone related to Accelerator and Hamazura. Do you think that there'll be any disruptions?"

There was no emotion toward Kinuhata in her tone.

She was basically just talking to herself.

Just to satisfy herself.

"It's true that I can't surpass an esper like Mugino, but that will change when I use those 'tools'. A martial arts champion can't possibly beat a fighter jet."

Silver Cross Alpha's powered suit.

Kuroyoru Umidori's biological robot.

Though the concept behind this application of power was different, in terms of the basics, they had already reached the same level. Thus, when they combined, the pros and cons were all 'linked' with each other.

"And, so, then, let's continue on like this. It was supposed to be Silver Cross' collection taking care of Hamazura, and I was supposed to take care of Accelerator."

Even so, she was not wavering despite losing her support.

Just like the way she had swept Kinuhata Saiai aside.

That was why she was a villain.

She would not hesitate, just for the sake of earning the trust of the higher ups.

"How troublesome. Let's kill off Hamazura before tuning Accelerator up, shall we?"

In a certain sense, she was harder to handle than Silver Cross.

In a certain sense, this monster that had Academy City flair all over her stepped onto the conquering path.

Part 2

Hamazura stepped out from the staff entrance of the underground subway and onto the surface. It was District 19. It seemed like he had unknowingly come there all the way from District 3 here as he was being pursued by Silver Cross.

This was a district that failed in development. The large number of buildings arranged side by side were all desolate, the doors of a lot of shops were all shut up. But on the other hand, technology that couldn't be seen in the market today was being re-researched here, like the vacuum pipes and steam engine. These had nothing to do with the latest technology at all...the source of this thinking was that ever since this district had become isolated, it was rumored that this place was a research facility for old technology.

Hamazura, Hanzou and Fremea were hiding inside a building in this district that had been provided by Kuruwa.

It had originally been a supermarket. It had a large number of shafts and elevators. The products had been removed, and the dust-covered shelves were still around.

Hanzou said sternly,

“There’re too many exits...it’s impossible to block them all.”

“We escaped to here because there’re more options to choose from.”

Wearing a mini-yukata, Kuruwa retorted.

“Compared to that, if we stay here, what’s the chance of us winning? The basics of defending is to stall for time. It’s rare to use this to method to get out of this. If we stall, what are the chances of us making it?”

“...Accelerator.”

Hamazura squeezed out this word.

“We can’t do anything, so if it’s that monster, any powered suit will be swept aside no matter how strong they are. This is the reason for us to stall. We can ensure that Fremea’s alive. Though I don’t know where that guy is, he’ll come rushing over once we contact him. Forget about us, that guy has enough reason to save Fremea.”

“HAMAZURA!!”

Hanzou shouted with a look of disbelief on his face.

“But that guy, that monster...!!”

Before Hanzou could continue, Hamazura shook his head.

There was a reason why the delinquent group Skill-Out would be against the #1 esper. That monster seemed to have some history with Komaba, and they couldn’t let Fremea hear that.

“Right now, Fremea’s our priority.”

“...”

Though Hanzou remained silent, it seemed like he was unable to accept it.

Fremea looked rather uncomfortable as she looked around at Hamazura, Hanzou and Kuruwa.

Kuruwa spoke up for Hanzou.

“Then, Hamazura-shi, do you have the way to contact that #1 esper?”

“Do you think we’re so familiar with each other that we’re willing to exchange numbers with each other?”

Hamazura tried to act casual and said,

“However, it seems like that guy has his own independent network. Speaking of which, I have no idea how on earth that guy got involved in this. Maybe something happened on the street and that guy just so happened to get involved naturally. It’ll be good if we can do ‘something’ to shake up this building.”

“Should be simple enough if we’re to go to the roof and light it up or something.”

“Add something more; A code that anyone can understand.”

Hamazura pondered for a while, and then took off the miniature powered suit helmet.

He passed it to Kuruwa.

“Place it near the fire. Anyone who’s spying through satellite surveillance or tapping the lines can identify it...so at least this is the latest way of testing it.”

“Understood.”

Kuruwa took the helmet, stroked it enthusiastically, and said,

“The weapons are stashed at the coin deposit box on the east side of the third level. The locks were changed but, with Hamazura-shi’s skills, there’s no need for a master key.”

“Thanks. Also, sorry for getting you involved in this.”

“Not really. It’s awesome. Not for money or fame, going up against some huge unknown authority just for the sake of a kid’s life, this is already a ninja’s way of living in those dramas!”

“Hanzou.”

“I got it!! No matter what, it’s the same whether we move or not. I have no intention of dying here like this.”

Kuruwa headed to the roof to send the message to Accelerator, while Hamazura and Hanzou headed off to the coin storage machine on the east side of the 3rd level. Though Fremea had nothing to do, it was scary for her to be alone, so she timidly followed behind Hamazura.

Normally speaking, a mini coin deposit box was about two mailboxes, and a larger one could accommodate cleaning tools that were placed upright. Like what Kuruwa had said, the lock was a lot more complicated than how it looked, but it was not like it couldn’t be opened with a few needles.

After opening it bit by bit, guns dropped out from within.

"...This isn't like a ninja at all."

"A samurai should be using a matchlock gun."

But these weapons didn't look like they would be able to break through a heavily-armored suit.

"How about these?"

Inside the largest cabinet, there was an automatic rifle that was even wider than Hamazura's back. Hanzou read the words engraved on the gun.

"Metal Eater M5...an anti-tank automatic rifle, huh? It was originally the MX, only with modifications done to the handle and scope, and a water cooler added to it. It was officially used in that war."

Instead of a gun, it was better to call it a savage block of metal that made anyone want to use it as a blunt ramming weapon.

"It's true that this thing will definitely cause some damage to that powered suit, the recoil's definitely not ordinary. An amateur would most likely end up blasting their shoulder."

"Better than nothing."

Picking up a magazine that was as thick as several dictionaries, Hamazura said,

"At least blowing the sound out of our ears is better than getting beaten down."

"You're right."

Hearing Hanzou's chuckle, Hamazura placed the pistol into the belt on his pants, grabbed the sling of the semi-automatic rifle and grabbed the Metal Eater. Using all the weapons that he could use, Hamazura said to Hanzou, who was beside him.

"About defense, what should we use for our barricades?"

"There're too many exits, and considering that the enemy has enough output to blow the wall up, it's useless to set up any barricades."

Hanzou scanned the supermarket map Kuruwa had handed him.

"Instead of that, we have to find an important location for us to make a path. We have to set up places to defend when we move inside, and thus use gunfire to prevent the enemy from advancing...luckily, there's still the Metal Eater."

"And what if the enemy blows up the wall?"

“That’s when we’re moving horizontally, but when we’re moving vertically, there’re only the paths there’re already there. The stairs, escalator, elevator access; the space here is extremely limited, and also, the number of powered suits that can pass through is limited as well. If we camp over there and snipe them, we should be able to take down a number of them.”

Passing through the level to meet up with Kuruwa, Hamazura and Hanzou found what was supposed to be a bank. However, there were only things like sofas and benches; it was impossible for money to be around, and things like ATMs had been moved away.

However, they had left something that they couldn’t move away.

The huge bank vault surrounded by the thick walls.

Hamazura and Hanzou glanced at each other.

“...What now?”

“Kuruwa got the electricity flow handled, and the backup electric supply of the bank vault is inside that ‘large box’. Once it’s locked, it won’t open even if we cut the electricity, unless we use a special code.”

However, Hanzou added on.

“It’s not a certainty that they can’t open it with brute force. And besides, there’s no road to retreat inside. Once it opens, there’s no way to escape...we can only stall for time. We can’t settle the problem like this.”

Then, Hamazura and Hanzou looked at Fremea.

It was a no go if they were to stuff everyone inside, but they also couldn’t leave this young kid on a gunfire battlefield. The enemy was definitely targeting at Fremea.

(The worst...)

Hamazura went silent.

He was pondering.

(The worst thing is for us to be gobbled up with this bank vault here. It’s likely that that #1 monster will get here before Fremea gets taken away.)

Hamazura’s fingers trembled unnaturally due to this premonition, and he could only sigh reluctantly deep inside his heart, but he couldn’t show this no matter what. Only in front of Fremea Seivelun was it imperative that they hide these feelings.

“Listen, Fremea. You’re going to hide inside this bank vault. The walls and door are rather thick, so it’s not easy for anyone to open this. It’s definitely safe for you to hide inside.”

“In the first place, what about you guys, Hamazura?”

“Next, we’re going to fight one splendid battle...it’s alright, Fremea just needs to stay quietly inside the bank vault. Go in, and when you come out, the battle will be over. We’ll, we’ll definitely protect you.”

“...no.”

Fremea suddenly said this.

She was trembling violently, her arms were hugging onto Hamazura’s waist.

“NO!! IN THE FIRST PLACE, I CAN STILL TELL THAT THOSE ARE LIES! YOU BIG LIAR!! I KNOW WHAT PEOPLE THAT SHOW THE EYES HAMAZURA IS SHOWING END UP LIKE!!”

She shouted crazily.

But something was proportionally different from everything else.

“KOMABA ONII-CHAN DIDN’T COME BACK! FREMEA’S OLDER SISTER DIDN’T COME BACK!! THOSE PEOPLE HAD THE SAME EXPRESSIONS AS HAMAZURA RIGHT NOW!! IT’S LIKE I TURNED AWAY, NOT EXPECTING THEM TO HIDE, AND THEN EVERYONE DISAPPEARED RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY EYES!!”

The people who had died.

Those people who had a deep relationship with Fremea.

Because she was in a position where she couldn’t know the truth, Fremea always carried the burden of having to live on. At the same time, she was afraid of having the people important to her disappearing on a whim. Thus, she would explode without warning and without restrain.

“No.”

The greatest terror.

That pain, and the wavering that Hamazura and Hanzou were showing now caused her to overly react. Hamazura’s acting wasn’t foolproof, and the burden that Fremea was bearing wasn’t something that could be fooled that easily.

“I DON’T WANT TO LET ANYONE DISAPPEAR!! I HAD ENOUGH OF THAT!! IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO ME!! SO PLEASE, DON’T GO ANYWHERE!!”

Hamazura went silent.

Komaba Ritoku.

Frenda Seivelun.

Thinking about these people who had disappeared, at this moment, he realized it. Most likely, there was a future for Fremea not to cry for. Why was it that the gentle future hadn’t arrived yet and that had he made this kid bawl?

Yes.

It was all because Hamazura was too weak.

In the past, he...no, the current Hamazura was the worst scumbag ever. He didn’t have any ability to handle this problem in front of him.

Also, what had happened to Komaba and Frenda were related to the deepest parts of Academy City’s darkness. Truthfully, it was already past what he could handle. So even if the same thing happened over again, it was hard for any happy ending to occur.

But Hamazura was over there.

When Komaba Ritoku and Frenda Seivelun ‘disappeared’, Hamazura did act as witness.

In contrast to Fremea, who didn’t know anything even after everyone had disappeared and couldn’t even do anything to help, Hamazura had the possibility to change anything. Even if it was weak, sad, even embarrassing, if he changed his choice, maybe they could continue to live.

Hamazura clenched his teeth.

It was as if the thing that hurt Fremea, that made his afraid wasn’t Silver Cross and the others. The reason had Hamazura’s name written all over it.

Even so, Hamazura couldn’t really heal Fremea’s inner wounds. Having known ‘the beginning and the end’, he understood that he couldn’t possibly create any wonderful miracles.

It was not the highest, not the ultimate, and not the most perfect.

However, he didn’t have a cold heart that wouldn’t respond to anything.

(...Komaba Ritoku is no longer around. Frenda Seivelun is no longer coming back as well. To a kid, the most important people to her have already vanished from right in front of her. This is a fact that can no longer be changed, nor can it be restored again.)

Searching.

The things he could do.

Even if everything was over, there were a lot of things that he could do.

(...That's why I won't allow any more losses. The things that Fremea Seivelun does not want to lose, I will definitely not let them disappear. No matter whether it's Academy City's darkness or the higher ups, I won't allow you guys to make this kid cry again, no matter who the enemy is, no matter what happens.)

His trembling stopped.

It didn't matter even if it was the secret group with powered suits, Hamazura was no longer afraid. It was meaningless to decide winning or losing like this. If they couldn't win, they would just have to create a winning condition. The problem subconsciously became a workable problem immediately. There was no need to follow a model answer set by the examiner, and it didn't matter whether it was twisted logic or not. It was not a problem without a solution, so there was no need to go over and try to find an answer over and over again.

"Heyo."

Hamazura placed the large Metal Eater against the wall, bent over and his eyes drew level with Fremea.

"Listen, Fremea. The people who missed very much, Komaba onii-chan and Frenda are both amazing people, they did many things that I couldn't. Most likely, I can't do the things they did."

"That's not the case."

Fremea shook her head.

"Hamazura didn't leave me alone to die. In the first place, he would come save me every time I got captured."

"Even so,"

For a moment, Hamazura looked like she was spot on, but he immediately denied Fremea's valuation of him.

“Truthfully, I’m just a minor character. I’m not the type of person who’ll be able to stay on the spotlight-lit stage. Most likely, if it’s Komaba onii-chan and the others, they would have immediately went on to do what they have to do instead of hesitating about here. They won’t be bothered about what to do, which is why they’re amazing people.”

Maybe it was a bit of a beautification, since Komaba Ritoku had been a delinquent and Frenda had sold out her Item comrades. However, they definitely weren’t lost. It was because they had things that they had to finish no matter what that they had managed to reach that outcome through their own methods.

Hamazura couldn’t do it.

No matter what he decided on, he would immediately succumb when a gun was pointed at his head. No matter what he choose, it would only remain there every day, and after that, he would continue to ponder whether whatever he had done was correct.

He was just that sort of person.

He definitely wouldn’t become a hero.

However,

But,

“But I’m here.”

Then, it was now time for Hamazura to convince Fremea.

The thing that anyone would take for granted; it was something that nobody couldn’t possibly have.

In order to remember those who were denied this, Hamazura again said this obvious face through his own mouth.

This time, definitely.

There was no need to act out this smile from deep within his heart.

“...We won’t ‘disappear’ that easily. Soldiers don’t necessarily end up ascending to Heaven. Even if everything’s lost, we can smile till the end.”

“Really?”

Trembling, Fremea reached her hand out and asked,

“Really, Hamazura won’t disappear?”

“No.”

“It’s a promise.”

Saying this, Fremea reached her little finger out.

There was still this method, Hamazura only just realized this.

“...Yeah.”

Seemingly embarrassed, Hamazura reached his own little finger out.

Both fingers crossed.

“It’s a promise.”

The intertwined fingers were separated, and Hamazura seemed to feel that a heavy load was taken off him as he sent Fremea into the large bank vault. Fremea continued to stare at Hamazura’s eyes until Hamazura closed the door properly.

After closing the door and turning the door lock, Hanzou said,

“The door lock has about 20 bars of titanium, and then it’s a magnetic lock. There’s even a vacuum set-up inside the crack of the door. For 12 hours, the door won’t operate after it’s closed. The same goes for our code, it’ll be ineffective when they enter it during this time.”

“...”

“It’ll get messy once the gunfight starts. Even if the #1 monster doesn’t arrive, the policemen patrolling on the streets will immediately rush over when they hear gunfire. The longer it lasts, the harder it’ll be for us to hide; so we’ll stick to the original plan and continue to try and stall for time...oi, Hamazura, what’s wrong?”

“That won’t do.”

Hamazura blankly said.

“Thinking about waiting for the cavalry to arrive will be rather consuming. It’s true that we have to protect the heart. Maybe Fremea will be saved, but when the bank vault opens again, she’ll start crying after seeing our corpses. There’ll be unnecessary tears on her face. That won’t do, that can’t be considered our victory.”

“...So, what do we do?”

“We have to win.”

Lifting up the Metal Eater M5, the delinquent answered without any hesitation.

“Me, Hanzou, and Kuruwa, we can’t lose a single one. We have to finish off every single powered suit, drag out the people who’re operating them and finish them off. There’s no need for Fremea to be involved with the darkness; there’s no reason to in the first place. That’s why we have to send that kid back to where she was from. An ordinary world without any life threatening situation, one that everyone can continue to smile to their hearts’ content. Definitely.”

“Are you kidding me...” Hanzou muttered.

In contrast, Hamazura said to his friend who was arching his back.

“There’s no need to follow me. Fremea and I should be the only targets, and they won’t really chase you and Kuruwa even if you guys escape. You two can live on to see Fremea’s smile, that’s a type of victory.”

“RUNNING AWAY SOUNDS GOOD! IF YOU REALLY THOUGHT SO, CAN YOU PLEASE FIND A PLACE WHERE I CAN’T SEE YOU BEFORE YOU REPEAT THOSE WORDS JUST NOW!! A KID’S TEARS ARE REALLY A POWERFUL THREAT!!”

“To actually make this decision; as expected, you’ve become like Leader Komaba, already past the realm of being a role player.”

They couldn’t let Fremea Seivelun cry any more.

Having confirmed their goal again, the two delinquents lifted the anti-tank gun and headed off to face the enemy.

Even though they couldn’t be heroes.

Hamazura Shiage had to protect Fremea Seivelun’s smile.

Part 3

The final battle of defense was at the 3rd level, the large vault in what was originally a bank.

Hamazura and the others set up traps on the road leading to the large bank vault, preparing to fight back by ambush.

“Ready!”

Walking towards Hamazura who had the Metal Eater M5 in front of him, Kuruwa said,

“It’s wired, so there’s no need to worry about electronic interference.”

“This is the 3rd floor, isn’t it? Even though a large bank vault can’t possibly be blown apart that easily, wouldn’t it fall down if the floor collapses?”

“A bank vault that’s to be used for renting out stuff like data drives and antiques should be rather detailed. Most likely, even if the entire 3rd level collapses, there’s an alloy pillar to support it.”

“It’s here.”

As if cutting off Hanzou’s words.

An explosion could be heard behind.

With the explosion, the large amount of dust underneath the air ducts dropped to the 1st level.

“Suddenly breaking the wall, now that’s quite the shock.”

“Get ready, Hamazura. You’re the one who decided to fight.”

There was no time to even idle around.

In the midst of the explosion of dust, a huge shadow appeared. It was a bipedal powered suit. The right hand seemed to be wielding a shield larger than its main body. The shield was extremely huge and thick, it felt like even the powered suit couldn’t lift it. There were wheels underneath the shield, and there was a hole in the middle with a cannon barrel the size of a human arm poking through it. Also, the slanted cannon was now aimed at Hamazura, who was on the corridor.

The gunfire continued to ring.

The machine gun shot holes through the floor in front of Hamazura, and then moved towards him as if it was cutting grass.

“Hamazura-shi!!”

Kuruwa grabbed the back of Hamazura’s neck and forcefully pulled him from where he was. The powered suit seemed like it was trying to destroy the entire floor instead of just aiming at the target as it continued to fire. Being chased by this steel slab of concrete, Hamazura, Kuruwa and Hanzou ran about on the corridor.

(That bastard, that was some serious firepower!!)

Running as he was looking down at the corridor below, Hamazura saw the miniature powered suit moving up the escalator.

“Kuruwa-chan! The no. 3 escalator!”

“Got it!”

Consecutive explosions occurred at each end of the escalator, and the escalator became a waterfall of rubble. The powered suit that had already moved up from the 2nd level to the 3rd level collapsed to the 1st level along with this waterfall of waste.

However, that wasn’t going to be enough to destroy the powered suit.

Hamazura continued to run as he swung the large anti-tank rifle.

He aimed at the center of the mini-powered suit below in the middle of all the waste and squeezed the trigger.

A booming explosion.

The terrifying impact pierced through his right shoulder, and yet that heavy Metal Eater M5 was still facing up. Even though he thought this, it was actually Hamazura who had been sent flying by the recoil even after getting himself into position, ending up forcefully separating the back of his neck from Kuruwa’s hand.

“Kuruwa...”

It was not just his shoulder, the unbelievable pain spread throughout his entire body. Even though Hamazura had wielded an assault rifle in Russia, he didn’t know how to wield it properly. It was not designed to be a weapon that was set on the ground.

He had no confidence in hitting it at all.

But he didn’t even have time to recover from the pain of the recoil, or confirm the situation downstairs

Because just as he was doing that, the sweep-shooting continued.

Hamazura was unable to stand up. He remained on the floor as he crawled away to avoid the cannon fire and collapsing floor, escaping down the corridor.

The trio flew into the shadow of the circular pillar.

Since it was a junction of tough and thick steel, it was the only place that could withstand the cannon’s piercing attack.

“Cheh, what was that?”

Hamazura checked the situation from within the shadow of the pillar.

The huge shot he had fired off had definitely pierced through the miniature powered-suit. However... It was strange. Since the impact had broken through the metal parts, the thick pilot cabin had been forced open, however there was no pilot inside and the pilot cabin remained open.

An explosion interrupted Hamazura’s thoughts.

Beside him, Hanzou squatted and chased the mini powered suit, but since it wasn’t fully autopilot, Hanzou avoided one attack after another.

The bullets then completely destroyed the open cabin, and just like that, the mini powered suit stopped completely.

“Seems like these powered suits were programmed. Most likely, they used something that Silver Cross has.”

Clack clack clack, plenty of sounds of metal hitting the floor could be heard.

Five new powered suits appeared from underneath the vents.

Hanzou frantically hid back behind cover.

“...This pillar isn’t going to make it.”

“The enemy doesn’t seem to have any reason to remain there. The escalator got destroyed, but they’ll find other ways to get up. The other levels and lifts...”

Just as he was saying that, Hamazura sensed something.

Right behind him.

On the other side of the open window, in the space that was supposed to be empty, a large shadow was floating. It was more like a 5m long praying mantis. It was not standing on 4 legs with 2 sickles, but had two sickles, two arms, and two legs as it was standing up. Translucent wings spread out from the armor and moved at a speed that Hamazura couldn’t catch, leaving an afterimage behind.

Different from the wings of a bird.

Normally, it was impossible for such a large object to have such small wings.

(...Does it use ultrasonic waves to mix the air around it into its wings...?)

It was unlike the wings of a butterfly or a moth. With the movement of the wings, it created an air flow that had a whirlpool-like effect that ended up creating more buoyancy. Most likely, the mantis was developed from that basis.

Hamazura immediately swung the Metal Eater M5.

But this was the limit.

The huge powered suit rushed through the broken window before Hamazura could even squeeze the trigger.

Hanzou and Kuruwa rolled away to the left while Hamazura rolled to the right.

There was a large cylinder-like thing on the back of the praying mantis, it was a thing that was used to store lots of cannons. Also, there were shields on the front side of the front legs, which had replaced the folded sickles, and there was an artificial weapon placed between the two shields.

The three barrels overlapped each other, looking like they could rotate.

And that they didn't need gunpowder to fire.

Using the basis of electromagnetism to fire metal bullets.

There were such things on the side of the front limbs' shields.

Gatling Railgun.

"—shi!"

Fear struck.

Hamazura squeezed the trigger of the anti-tank rifle before he could even aim. He was not intending to destroy the giant praying mantis, but trying to use the recoil to fly back.

It was not a huge hit that could twist his wrist.

But that was definitely the right decision.

Right after that would be a storm of steel.

shshshshshshshshshs——!!! The sound vanished.

RVF Over Modelcrash "RAILGUN"

It was like the huge destruction power of the large cannons in the gunfight a moment ago.

A lane had cut perfectly through the place Hamazura had been standing on, and the damage left a 1m diameter hole. The barrels let out over 4000 bullets per minute, piercing the from the third level all the way to the first level, and the entire building toppled.

If one was to take the size of the barrels into account, it couldn't be considered a 'cannon', but rather, a 'gun'. However, it didn't match with the destructiveness of a gun.

There were a few powered suits looking for a way to attack, but they were instantly reduced to trash.

The level was different.

Way over that level.

Hamazura heard a cracking sound, and after a while, realized that he was biting his teeth. He widened his eyes and saw the abdomen of the huge praying mantis with its folded wings.

Five Over.

Modelcase_"RAILGUN".

It was referring to the #3 of the just seven Level 5 espers in Academy City, the Railgun. Most likely, it was a powered suit with the replicated power of that esper, and was completely based on the philosophy of using only technology to create one that exceeds the original.

Science and technology continued to improve, and the latest technology yesterday may no longer be superior today.

A flying machine that was already terrifying, and a monster that could fire several thousand times in one minute; the terror of science was revealed again.

(...#3.)

The one above the #4, Mugino Shizuri.

A powered suit that surpassed the #3.

The terrifying latest model moved its head, and the killing machine scanned the surroundings.

He couldn't move his legs.

His body started to tremble, unable to move at all.

Hamazura finally realized that his vision was narrowing.

"GET OVER HERE, HAMAZURA!!"

He heard Hanzou shout at him, as Hanzou and Kuruwa ran off in different directions. Hamazura looked around, his forehead emitting cold sweat as he thought that he would die, and then,

He saw the gun that was tied up.

Hamazura immediately abandoned the Metal Eater M5 and jumped over the railing of the 3rd level corridor without hesitation.

An explosion scattered, and the Gatling railgun bullets missed slightly, reducing the floor and walls on the other side of the corridor to dust.

Hamazura hung onto the railing on the 2nd level and frantically flipped himself up.

A rain of destruction fell from above.

The corridor on the 3rd level above him and the one on the 2nd level below him got shot right through. Hamazura leapt towards the CD shop in front of him and fell towards the 1st level.

(...The piercing ability's definitely not normal, but it seems like the accuracy isn't that great. Did they purposely fix the rotating part of the gun to prevent the gun from being affected by the storm whipped up by the electromagnetic bullets?)

If he continued to do some minor movements, maybe he could avoid being aimed at.

But what happened next crushed his naïve thoughts thoroughly.

Behind him.

Before he could even feel fear, Five Over was already standing there. It was floating in mid-air, ignoring the fact that its bullets had destroyed the entire corridor. The ultrasonic waves gathered air to power the translucent wings.

"'...hua...keke...'"

He seemed to hear something.

It was a sound with ambiguous intent, but a chill seemed to strike Hamazura's spine.

"...creak...zz...zzzack..."

(Silver Cross...!? That guy shouldn't be able to stand up. He definitely had an injury that will kill him if he doesn't go to the hospital, so how is it possible for him to be here?)

A powered suit was a machine that strengthened an injured body externally.

So he managed to return by using that?

Or was it that a third-party thought that he 'could still be used' and he had gotten dragged onto the battlefield forcefully? Checking the atmosphere, one could find that there was no will in Silver Cross' voice as compared to before.

There was no time to ponder too much.

Kak!! With a mechanical sound, the barrels that were bundled together scattered as they start to move on their own.

"Wha..."

Even so, they were railguns.

The bullets that could pierce through 3 or 4 cars lost their rapid fire capability as they pummeled the porous 2nd level.

(Damn it...! What's with this reloading method!!?)

Normally, a Gatling gun filled up the barrel by quickly rotating it, but a Gatling railgun was different from the traditional one as it seemed to be an enhanced version.

Thinking that stopping around was meaningless. Hamazura tried to escape before the rain of bullets struck, only for the floor to collapse before that. The hole was several meters tall, and with that sound, Hamazura landed on the 1st floor.

The pain pierced through his body, squeezing out all the oxygen in his body.

"Ku...ha...!!"

The oxygen in his lungs had been exhausted, so he couldn't shout out.

Even so, it should be rather serious. If he didn't have the knight armor that the Dragon Rider used, he probably wouldn't have been able to survive with his limbs intact.

Looking at the space and scattered dust around him, Hamazura stood on the crushed materials and pondered.

(What do I do now...?)

He had no time to care about the blood in his mouth.

(If I don't deal with that guy, I won't have time to fight against the other powered suit. But as for what to do, I can't shoot that guy down properly. Besides, that gun's not with me anymore.)

He only had two magazines that were as thick as metal dictionaries.

Even if they had powerful bullets, they couldn't damage anything if he couldn't shoot them.

There was power, but it was hard to create a gun in this critical situation. If he used something inferior to replace it, the explosion would blow Hamazura apart if he tried to fire.

Of course any gun other than the Metal Eater M5, like handguns or semi-automatic rifles, would be completely useless.

(Five Over uses different sensors to scan the battlefield all the time. Anything that can be used as a weapon, anything that can shoot back, it probably knows everything that's hiding.)

How was he going to fight back?

Hamazura continued to rack his blank head, but the enemy wasn't going to wait for his decision.

"...?"

After exhaling, Hamazura had a doubt.

Five Over didn't chase after him.

He was definitely unable to move, in a state where anyone could just deal him the finishing blow.

(Why...)

Thinking about it for a while, Hamazura noticed it.

The enemy's main priority wasn't Hamazura Shiage, but Fremea Seivelun. It may have been unable to detect her inside the large bank vault, but once the AI wondered "why isn't there a response from Fremea," the answer would be easy.

How could the giant door of the vault endure the rapid fire?

"DAMN IT!"

Enduring his aching body as he tried to support himself, Hamazura dragged it forward.

Even if there was a risk of being eavesdropped, Hamazura still contacted Hanzou through his cell phone.

“Hanzou!! Can the Metal Eater still work? Five Over...that Gatling railgun’s after Fremea!! Do something to stop it!!”

“An anti-tank rifle might be useful, but it’s going to be tough taking out this guy, Hamazura.”

Hanzou said in distress.

“Can’t that giant rifle do anything!?”

“It should be useful if it’s close range, but this guy’s speed and power are directly related. The larger the initial speed, the closer the target, the larger the damage. So how are you going to get close? If that typhoon-like shooting continues, we can’t even reveal our faces from our hiding spots.”

Hamazura slammed a fist into the wall.

If he wanted everyone to remain alright, he would have to destroy Five Over, but if he wanted to destroy Five Over, he had to risk his life.

Holding the magazine the size of a dictionary, Hamazura pondered.

And then looked up.

An electric cable drooped down from the collapsed ceiling.

“...Hanzou, there’s no need to completely destroy the Five Over. Can we at least stop it from moving?”

“‘That’s an unmanned AI. There’s no worry about destroying it.’”

“How long will it take?”

“‘Cheh, if we maintain this battle prowess and fight with a plan, about 10 minutes; but we’re done if it’s set to ‘destroy as priority’.’”

“That’s enough. Go, but do as much as what you can. If you find out that something’s wrong, hurry up and escape.”

“‘And what do we do after we prevent that guy from advancing? In this current situation, even the Metal Eater M5 can’t destroy that electric Praying Mantis. There’s nothing we have that exceeds that in firepower.’”

“...If that’s the case, we can only use all the firepower that we have now.”

Now, they had to decide on the location.

Hamazura stared at the ceiling, and then looked in front.

“We’ll stop that Five Over here.”

“‘How?’”

“If this is a hiding place, things other than weapons are collected here, right? Bedding, food, whatsoever. Let Kuruwa-chan deal with that. Since the gas and electricity work, the refrigerator and house storage work, right?”

“‘And so what?’”

“The lights? The refrigerator and induction cookers have them, and you can’t say that the mini-lights don’t have them.”

“‘There’s a whole lot of LEDs on the main floor! And so what? Are you going to blind that monster’s dog-eye?’”

“That’s right.”

Having his own joke replied to with a joke, Hanzou couldn’t say anything.

But Hamazura continued,

“...We’re going to use our household appliance buddies to destroy it.”

Part 4

Five Over.

Modelcase_”RAILGUN”.

The powered suit that was named as such flew past the damaged corridor and slowly landed onto the 3rd level. Originally, the purpose of its extremely high flight capability was to allow the powered suit to avoid having to stand on the uneven ground caused by the destruction of the Gatling railgun. No matter whether it was a narrow room or a hurricane outside the house, it could remain in the air as if it was standing an invisible support.

The AI had already searched through the building 5 times, and yet it couldn't find any response from Fremea Seivelun.

There weren't many places that its radar couldn't scan, and so the number of hiding places had been drastically reduced.

The first place it should check was the large bank vault on the 3rd level.

It was alright even if Fremea wasn't there.

If she was not there, it just meant that it already checked one area. If it continued to check all the hiding spots, it could definitely find its target.

Even if the target ran towards another hiding place, the movements would be discovered by the 'thorough search' that was regularly activated.

In other words, instead of being futile, if it continued to work like this, it could find the target sometime soon.

The process had a method of 'settling everything from the beginning to the end' and, though those complicated conditions were useless in doing delicate stuff, it was extremely effective in destroying things.

Five Over passed through the 3rd level. In order to prevent using too many bullets, the AI was set to showing all the actions that it had done before. Without this, it would most likely choose to employ the quickest method of blowing away all walls and obstacles.

And then, there were obstacles.

More accurately, while carrying out the 'thorough search', it captured the figures of some people hiding in the hidden corners.

Two of them.

One was wielding an anti-tank rifle.

The threat level was designated at 'to be eliminated'. To the AI, it was the same for Hanzou and Kuruwa, who were attacking it.

However, Hamazura didn't try to shoot consecutively.

From the blind spot, he just extended the barrel out and, after shooting at the lowest possible angle, it disappeared again into the corner. Though he seemed to worry that it was hard to move the gun while being close to the wall, there was no indication of any mistake, and the terrifying recoil of the Metal Eater M5 didn't injure his body.

Anyone seeing it would be amazed by it, but the AI didn't have such a high level of capability.

Remembering to conserve ammo and follow the current route, the AI concluded,

He was piercing the wall without holding back.

The target seemed to notice the mantis-like sickles twisting unnaturally.

The figure on the other side of the wall frantically got down, and at the same time, the Gatling railgun started to shoot. —zuzuzu—zuzu—zuzuzu!! With the supersonic impact, the weak cover was blown apart.

Even though it hadn't neutralized the target, the AI continued to work.

Without the cover, it was easier to hit the target.

So there was no need to change objectives.

This was an AI that would insist on 'being able to finish objectives with simple actions' no matter what. Five Over just moved forward, and compared to modern humanoid-looking weapons, it was more like a multi-purposed homing missile.

The most suitable mind for this was to be without pity.

Through this way of being unable to think flexibly, anyone could see the ideals of the people controlling Five Over.

And Five Over response to those people who voluntarily ran out was the Gatling railgun.

It was not aiming at them.

Estimating the path that the targets would move towards, the machine directly attacked the wall and floor, intending to cut off their return path. It was basically impossible to avoid a Gatling railgun.

Then,

It would settle this the next time.

It reached the final destination by 'being able to finish objectives with simple actions'.

The right sickle of the mantis aimed at its target accurately.

At this moment, the 'thorough search' got another response. There was someone several meters directly behind. It was someone pushing a trolley forward at an automobile's speed, and there were 2 boxes of different sizes stacked on it.

There was the likelihood of an explosive.

Having decided that there was a risk, the AI quickly turned Five Over around. The Gatling gun blew up all suspicious items near the trolley. It was more appropriate to describe the metal cannons as ‘explosions’.

There was fruit contained inside the boxes.

Most of the ball-shaped fruits like apples and oranges had been reduced to powder, and the remains scattered outside the box. For fear that they were explosives, the AI partially missed its shots to hit the contents out.

Five Over continued to access the threat level.

All the fruit that had rolled out of the box were sliced down the middle and, to an outsider, this sure looked suspicious. However, as a process that determined things on threat level, it completely ignored that.

There were other ‘strange things’ around, their threat levels still undetermined.

Five Over cannon turned from the trolley to the person pushing the trolley.

Hamazura Shiage.

At that moment, he smiled. The AI’s thought process was unable to understand it, but it understood something else—that the target was carrying something, something that connected a 100V direct current to a household appliance.

A mass of metal.

It was formed by lots of LEDs that were used to light the surface.

More accurately, it was a pile of things used to light the levels.

Electromagnetic light devices.

The trumpet-like exterior of the mass of metal covers everything, obviously pointing in front.

In the end,

However,

This was the assessment of the threat level. The strong electromagnetic waves would damage electric appliances, but the tens of thousands of LEDs wouldn’t be able to damage the numerous parts of Five Over, which was equipped to deal with such things.

Since Five Over used strong railguns as weapons, it was constantly exposed within strong magnetic fields and electromagnetic waves.

It eliminated them one by one.

The AI determined that it was just ‘a result that may occur through a simple action’. The basis of taking this action was the reason why Five Over was a weapon.

Thus,

Five Over AI’s couldn’t tell.

Originally.

The humans who have fear and intention to live on would actually think of taking on the Gatling railgun as if it were a joke weapon, what caused them to think like this?

In other words, believing that they could win.

It was impossible for a human to deliberately stand in front of this monster without that.

Five Over had destroyed all the boxes in front of it, and there was a large number of sliced fruit inside. After that, something ‘strange’ happened. The anti-tank rifle Metal Eater M5 fired at it.

The system decided that it was dangerous now because of the gun firing.

Though half the fruit was smothered, the remaining ones scattered all over the place.

Of course, Five Over’s upper and lower body was covered by them as well.

And then, the things that had been specially inserted into the fruits was for the ‘warhead to point directly upwards’ when it landed.

This was what Hanzou had said.

The Metal Eater M5 had to be very close if it wanted to destroy Five Over.

But even if it did get close, it was useless if one didn’t fire.

Speaking of which.

Regarding explosives, most people would think of firepoints.

But it was not just limited to that.

For example,

Strong electromagnetic waves could trigger a very sensitive explosive.

Earlier than Five Over's sickle, faster than before the Gatling railgun could blow Hamazura's body to bits.

THOMP THOMPTHOMPTHOMPTHOMP!!! The shockingly loud sound that was enough to shake the air spread from Hamazura's ears to his abdomen.

In the midst of the sliced fruit, the hemisphere tips of the fruits revealed bullets. Naturally, a large number of bullets were facing up.

But almost half the fruits had been destroyed by the Gatling railgun, and started to fire all over the place.

From right below Five Over, into all directions.

This was like a real explosion, it was a storm of destruction all over the place.

"Damn it!!"

The 'target' holding the electromagnetic light device frantically got down.

But Five Over didn't have any time to pursue.

Orange sparks flew out of the armor.

The threat assessment program was terminated before it could be completed, and the calculations were damaged.

Without the barrel to adjust the explosive of the gunpowder, the power of the bullets was greatly weakened; but the distance was important, and firing from point-blank range created a considerably similar amount of damage.

Cracks appeared on the surface of the armor, and the powered suit let out a creaking sound as it tried to move, only for the ceiling to suddenly drop on it. The Five Over bullets that missed had done significant damage to the ceiling.

This time, finally,

Five Over stopped.

The powered suit that technically surpassed the #3 esper.

The thing in front of it let out a voice that the AI's overly-process thinking couldn't understand.

In other words.

A human voice that had his own emotions.

“...That #4 I know of is even scarier than this.”

Part 5

Kinuhata Saiai was hanging upside down on the office building.

As the steel water tank had been destroyed from the inside, a large waterhole had formed on the side of the roof. A part of her woolen sweater got caught by the sharp edge of the debris.

Even though she had the Offense Armor ability, she couldn’t negate the damage completely. It was as if her abdomen had been hit a few times, and the impacts that had reached her vertebrae caused all her strength to disappear. However, this was already the best case scenario. If she didn’t have any ability to protect herself, she would most likely have been crushed to bits.

(...Though it’s super lucky that no one’s inside the building, this definitely is the work of the ‘higher ups’)

But Kinuhata didn’t think further.

The door of the elevator linking the roof to the inside opened.

What appeared wasn’t an office worker or a building caretaker.

But rather, a young-looking guy with an extremely menacing expression.

“...The, #1...?”

The red-eyed white-haired esper was leaning on a modernistic looking cane. Accelerator looked rather impatient as he stared at Kinuhata dangling off the debris of the water tank.

“The Freshmen will definitely do their utmost to prevent Anti-Skill from getting involved. My partners heard about this, Kuroyoru Umidori or Silver Cross Alpha, who’s related to who?”

“And your main point is?”

“What those guys are planning. The Freshmen are targeting a brat called Fremea Seivelun. I’d like to set up some precautions before she gets caught.”

“Seivelun...? Damn it, so that crybaby would go about being nosy because of this?”

“Do you have any idea of where they went?”

“Since you tapped on the secret messages of the Freshmen, shouldn’t you be able to understand?”

“Right now, they’ve already set it to top secret according to the battle situation. They’re all talking about money no matter what the message is. Since all the related organization messages were classified, it’s a waste of time to tap on them...anyway, the Freshmen don’t seem like they have the complete support of the higher-ups.”

“I super see.”

“Then, any clues?”

“Ehhmmaa.”

Hanging upside now, Kinuhata shrugged her shoulders.

“Shouldn’t be far away from here.”

Part 6

“Hamazura!!”

Hanzou showed his face from the other side of the passage.

“We did it, oi, we really sunk that Five Over!!...I say, is it alright to go close to it? It won’t go berserk, right?”

“No problem, it shot all its ammo.”

Hamazura collected a large number of LED lights and dropped the electromagnetic light devices in his hand before running towards Hanzou and Kuruwa, who were in turn running at him.

“Hurry up! How many bullets do we have left? The Metal Eater M5 bullets!!”

“What are you talking about, Hamazura, the electric mantis is already...”

“Have you forgotten?”

Hamazura grabbed Hanzou’s shoulders and shook him violently.

“Five Over’s not the only powered suit that’s here. Some of them got wiped out in the shootout just now, but there’re still a few of them left!!”

And those suits weren’t going to be destroyed without the firepower of the Metal Eater M5.

However, it was over if those few machines were to gather and attack, or maybe it could be even worse than just a single Five Over.

Hanzou frantically confirmed the number of bullets they had left.

“...We have 7 rounds, but I can’t guarantee that all of them will work, and based on the enemy’s toughness, it might take a few rounds. It’s too hard to use these remaining bullets to destroy all the enemies!!”

“But there’s nothing else that can immobilize the unmanned powered suits.”

As the owner of the place, Kuruwa knew best what items were stored there.

“Light machine guns and assault rifles are going to be deflected no matter how many we use.”

“What do we do now, Hamazura? Do you think that the trap just now can work?”

“I have a plan.”

Crak crak crak, the rumbling sounds of suspended objects could be heard from different directions.

Intending to surround them.

There was no time left.

The only thing that could save them was the ‘rule’ that Hamazura was wearing.

Part 7

PATAPATAPATAPATAPATAPATA!!! The continuous gunfire rang inside Kuroyoru Umidori’s ears. The numerous windows of the abandoned building were shattered, and the building itself was starting to tremble a bit.

Though she had spent quite a bit of effort in fighting Kinuhata Saiai, as of the current situation, Silver Cross' collection of items were still useful. It had been 10 minutes since they had gone in, so they should have destroyed everything inside, right?

"...It's about time, nya?"

She muttered to herself. What left a deep impression on her was the huge farming machinery that was targeting humans right now. These machines could easily get from one point to another without feeling any dilemma that any human would seriously feel. What they lacked was the judgment between life and death, so they had the idea of crushing the enemy's flesh 'to make sure that they were dead'.

(...It's already the age of moving unmanned machinery, couldn't we just leave these kinds of jobs to them?)

It was true that Silver Cross and Kuroyoru had a rather ambiguous attitude with regards to 'humans' and 'machines', but she didn't mind the ridicule at all.

Even so, if they weren't kept in check, the human flesh could be crushed into bologna. There may be a need to make sure that they were able to be distinguished through the human eye to allow people to identify them easily.

However, it was likely that she would be hit accidentally if she entered an unmanned suit's operational area.

"Well, I'll wait till it happens then."

Kuroyoru again stroked the dolphin doll that was about to expand again.

"...They're just like mechanical toys, I can rip them to scrap metal within 10 seconds if I want to."

ZOZOZOZOZOZO...an unknown sound echoed throughout the darkness.

Something was strengthening her.

A cyborg.

The large number of baby hands-like things seemed to multiply like a large swarm of locust, looking even more menacing and intimidating as they covered her like a cloak behind.

This was all set up for Kuroyoru's ability, a battery.

Amassing more than mere thousands of them, the 'firing point' didn't just fire Bomber Lances, but was an interference to 'everything that flows within a specific area'. It was the same thing with creating a large nitrogen lance, this was to create space to absorb

nitrogen, to allow easy manipulation of explosions after all the nitrogen was absorbed at will.

This power was no longer of a Level 4 esper's ability.

Besides, Kuroyoru herself wasn't interested in that outdated ranking system.

"...I was criticized for doing things such that I don't even care about who're my allies or foes. This time, it's somewhat a defeat for me to earn money in exchange for a life, so which side will be angered?"

In order to make the situation even more chaotic, the youthful queen headed towards the building.

At this moment, she suddenly stopped.

A mocking snarl appeared on her face.

"Well, it's better for you to come out anyway."

That white figure was leaning on the modernistic cane as he stood opposite to her.

Accelerator.

Academy City #1; in terms of ranking, he was at the top of the seven Level 5 espers.

Kuroyoru suddenly laughed,

"But you're a lot more cautious than I expected, or did the war change your personality? To actually scout out information just to preserve your battery life, this sure is different from the thought process I know of. I thought you would waste your energy flying about...well, thanks to you, I may not be able to catch up."

An obvious taunt.

"You want to protect Fremea, right? Or is it Hamazura? Well, either way, I can guarantee that they 'died' inside. 'You guys', including that dead Hamazura, are just a little group of resistance, the higher ups won't get angry even if we kill you guys off."

But Accelerator didn't mind these words, instead focusing on Kuroyoru herself.

"...Is this what happens when you try to patch up that inability of yours?"

The muttering from the #1's heart didn't tangle Kuroyoru up.

"Though the timing isn't great, I did gather all the necessary conditions, right?"

Another person with tremendous power.

Any Level 0 who let Kuroyoru advance would definitely die, though whoever tried to block her would still at least have a chance of survival.

“Speaking of which, even if we leave them alone, they’ll definitely be crushed to bits inside. Haha, or should I ask if we should check whether they’re still in human shape? Everyone should be the same when they’re buried.”

“...Are you happy?”

“Ah?”

“Are you really happy to be staying there?”

That place.

The lair of evil.

A certain Level 0’s still staring at me with those eyes up till now, Accelerator thought.

Of course, Kuroyoru wasn’t mindful about this thinking.

Her response to Accelerator’s question was pretty simple.

Her tone changed.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m definitely happy. I’M REALLY HAPPY HERE!! THIS IS THE PINNACLE OF THE WORLD. TO BE ABLE TO BE IN A PLACE WHERE I CAN RELEASE EVIL. THIS IS ALL I EVER WANTED!! NO MATTER HOW MUCH MONEY IS OFFERED, I’LL KILL. THERE’S A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO LIFT THEIR CHINS AS THEY LOOK DOWN ON PEOPLE. AND WITH THIS CYBORG, MY BODY, THE WAY I LIVE; THEY’RE EVEN MORE OUTSTANDING THAN ANYONE ELSE LIVING IN ACADEMY CITY!! I SHOULD BE HAPPY ABOUT THIS, RIGHT!!?”

“...”

Kuroyoru’s words which were specially targeted at a certain part of Accelerator’s thinking became a reality due to the higher ups of Academy City having a rather poor taste. This was somewhat like a conversation with himself.

Now the irritation at her was being redirected back at him.

“Don’t tell me you think that just because you’re the strongest Level 5 in Academy City, you’ll definitely not lose in a power battle?”

She continued on with her words of mockery.

The toy dolphin started to distort from within.

“No way, it can’t be like this, right!? ‘These guys’ that I’m controlling behind me aren’t just sorted by power or destruction, but cyborgs!!”

Numerous arms appeared from the damaged dolphin doll, attaching themselves onto Kuroyoru’s upper right body.

These weapons had originally been developed as ‘artificial goods meant to replace body functions’.

Those barely alive things could ignore a human figure and expand a certain part of the body.

“Though you’re the #1 of Academy City, you did taste defeat before. For example, Kihara Amata, who used that reflection of yours against you and consciously pulled his fist right in front of you to let the reflection hit the fist into you.”

Accelerator knew what she wanted to say.

The large number of arms behind Kuroyoru were moving about like waves.

“But my ‘arms’ are cyborgs, they’re machines, completely artificial things that’re controlled through numbers!! I can counter you by using Kihara Amata’s calculations!!”

Facing a past threat head to head.

That tone, that way of thinking was the perfect way to destroy Accelerator.

“Then, Mr. #1, what are you planning to do? Kihara Amata only used his human fists, so if it’s my Bomber Lances, it’ll be over in a single hit. If you don’t want to die, bring it on. I’ll beat you down and ground you up.”

Crak crak crak!!! Several thousand ‘arms’ got into ready position.

Each arm could create a Bomber Lance freely, and in groups, they could completely control all there air flow around her.

There were tens of thousands or ways to attack. By setting the inputs to the ‘Kihara Amata value’ that caused Accelerator quite a headache, she could definitely beat him with reflection.

The lances started to attack from all over.

No matter where Accelerator tried to hide, there was no safe zone in the air. Even if the Bomber Lances themselves couldn’t touch him, in groups, they could manipulate the air in the sky.

It was impossible to defend or dodge.

If so, Accelerator made his own decision.

At this moment, the strongest Level 5 esper in Academy City made his move.

"...Humph."

Exhaling slightly, he moved sideways, as if he was letting aside a path.

At that moment, Kuroyoru Umidori did not understand the real meaning behind his action. It was because she had a certain way of thinking implanted within her that she was unable to erase that abnormal feeling. In this situation, no, no matter what happened, that monster would definitely not 'make way'. There was definitely a trick behind this move. Even her backup thoughts couldn't think of why he would do this.

Or maybe,

Kuroyoru continued to remain on this path of evil.

And Accelerator had abandoned this path.

Was this what makes them different?

"Why? How..."

Because of that, Kuroyoru doubted.

At that moment, Accelerator muttered,

"You're mistaken."

"...?"

"The first characteristic of a mechanical weapon is that it's not completely controlled by numbers. A mere weapon does not have any thoughts or personal beliefs. All these are decided by the will of the user. If you think wildly, you'll only end up with a wild outcome; a serious idiot who uses it may end up with a serious outcome...well, 'using a weapon' is different from mastering it anyway."

"Are you saying that I can't control cyborgs of this size?"

"That's why I moved aside."

Without answering the enemy's question, Accelerator looked like he didn't care as he continued to say in an impatient tone,

“Let me say this first, this isn’t directed at you.”

GASHYAN! At that moment, something rang.

Something seemed to fly out from the window on the 3rd level of the abandoned building. It landed on the floor and bounced around a few times before rolling to Kuroyoru’s feet... it was one of Silver Cross’ collection that had been crushed...in other words, a powered suit.

The gunfire ceased.

And what appeared at the window was a certain precious object...

(Five Over...?)

Had the gunfire stopped just to indicate that the suppression inside was over?

Considering this, Kuroyoru realized that something was not right.

There was a large crack on the powered suit.

The hatch of the pilot seat was twisted, revealing a hole.

It was as if it had been ripped open by a human.

After that, she immediately remembered that the Dragon Rider equipment Hamazura Shiage was wearing had been created by Academy City. In other words, it was operated the same way as Five Over was.

In other words.

(No way...!?)

It was too late for her to feel a chill.

The reason why Accelerator backed away became a reason that Kuroyoru ‘had’.

The overwhelming fire that was fired at Kuroyoru Umidori.

Shots were fired at her at a speed of 4000 shots per minute, each shot was enough to surpass the #3’s railgun.

The two Gatling railgun on the two sides of the electronic mantis were shooting at Kuroyoru’s ‘arms’ from behind. Those were sickles that summoned death, with one swing enough to slice these esper weapons as if they were harvesting wheat.

The railguns trajectories fired at Kuroyoru from both sides.

That small space could rival a guillotine.

“Damn...IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!!!”

If she was fully prepared, Kuroyoru would win against Five Over head on based on ability alone. However, she reacted slowly. That small gap of a mere few seconds destroyed a large number of those specially made ‘arms’ of hers.

Even so, facing the two bullet sickles, Kuroyoru immediately responded.

She moved her remaining several hundred ‘arms’ about to create a large number of Bomber Lances. The storms created by the manipulation of the atmosphere deflected the bullets, and the large number of huge lances clashed directly with the railguns with amazing devastation, generating lots and lots of storms. Kuroyoru even considered that merely using air alone wasn’t going to do the job, so she placed a large number of ‘arms’ in front of her to act as shields.

(It can work.)

Even though she was on the defense, Kuroyoru was still thinking about counterattacking.

Basically, it was still attack for her.

(The Gatling railgun will use up a huge amount of electricity and create loads of heat. It can’t possibly continue to fire forever. The safety feature will have a cooling period for some time, so if I counterattack at that moment, it’s not hard to destroy Five Over...)

“You played the wrong card.”

As if he was trying to interrupt Kuroyoru’s thoughts, Accelerator muttered coldly.

The base of that thinking process.

The voice of the person who knew how to use that power the most.

“If you want to fight defensively, you have to reflect first. That vector transformation by concentrating on smaller areas can’t possibly hold on against such a large area of attack, right? To actually abandon a shield and use your lances to block this rain of bullets, you look like you’re juggling over there.”

“...!?”

Not to attack, but to defend.

Not Kuroyoru Umidori, but Kinuhata Saiai.

“If you want to specialize your attacks, you should have thoroughly destroyed it. If you have such power that you’re so proud of, it should be beneficial for you to quickly attack to prevent it from getting to you.”

The adverse effect of being unable to get through.

Also known as the way of life being shaken up.

This referred to the basic instincts of living things, to subconsciously choose to defend against this avatar of destruction known as the Gatling railgun.

Accelerator impatiently criticized this series of actions,

“What a throwaway, you cyborg.”

A large number of ‘arms’ were destroyed, and the mechanical equipment exploded.

Kuroyoru Umidori was sent crashing to the ground by this rain of shrapnel.

The winner was decided.

Part 8

Hamazura Shiage rode on the Five Over as he walked out of the abandoned building. It should have be able to use its wings to fly, but he didn’t use that unknown technology. Hamazura directly moved from the stairs to the 1st level, passing through the main entrance.

The powered suit that appeared in front of Accelerator released its hatch, revealing Hamazura’s face from within.

“Is it over?”

“The remaining ones were taken away by that irritating clone. However, you took out the two most important people, so it’s just a matter of time. If you can use that, it means that the original got wasted.”

“That’s the case. Right now, Kuruwa-chan...that ninja girl’s holding it.”

Accelerator peered inside the interior of the powered suit.

There were cables attached between the special suit Hamazura was wearing and the inside space. Most likely, he had destroyed the main system of Five Over and attached the special equipment of his clothing to it to allow him to do the calculations better.

It worked because the principle was the same, and it was activated during that critical moment.

“Are you still able to process the information?”

“Which one do you think is wiser, to think of a way to do it or to do it thoroughly from scratch? By the way, the latter involves having to redo all the mechanics.”

“...It’s like leaving some cooking utensils to a woman who knows how to cook and expecting a table full of homecooked food, is it?”

Ignoring Accelerator’s contempt, Hamazura lowered his head.

Kuroyoru Umidori was lying on the floor.

She had been hit by numerous ‘shrapnel’ and had lost quite a lot of blood, but at least she still had her limbs intact. Even facing such a sweeping fire, she actually had not been hit directly. As expected of a high level esper of Academy City, she was not an enemy that could be fought using just common sense.

“So the Freshmen commotion is over, right?”

“Where’s that Fremea Seivelun brat?”

“Inside the large bank vault. It’ll open in half a day because of the timer control.”

“...How troublesome. I’ll just use my power to force it open.”

“I wanted to as well, but we need to hide the weapons before Anti-Skill arrives, or it’ll be quite troublesome for Kuruwa-chan.”

While talking, the two people subconsciously ignored Kuroyoru Umidori.

That was a disaster.

They were still unable to grasp the nature of the thing they were fighting against.

Cyborgs.

Machines.

They had been shattered into numerous pieces when the Gatling railgun fired on it, but the machine couldn’t work if a part was missing. At this moment, by linking part A, part B and part C though, they could create a ‘part D’.

In other words,

Even if they were crushed, the ‘arms’ wouldn’t necessarily be completely neutralized.

“...Ha.”

A sigh.

Hamazura saw the collapsed Kuroyoru stretch her small hand forward.

At the same time,

The 100+ ‘arms’ were barely patched together as they moved.

The target was neither Hamazura Shiage nor Accelerator.

Fremea Seivelun.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

Boom!! The sound of an explosion could be heard.

A large amount of air mixed together to form a several hundred meters long gigantic lance. The aim was rather messed up as well; Fremea was definitely on the 3rd level, but Kuroyoru’s lance was aimed at the ground, as if it was aiming at the ground level.

But that was enough.

Once she swung the lance horizontally, it would be enough to hack the abandoned building. It was hard to say if the bank vault could completely endure the impact of the fall, and the distorted power itself was enough to easily rip the walls of the bank vault apart.

This was Academy City’s standard.

A subversion of common sense that was under scientific discipline.

“THEN TAKE THIS, MY FINAL HOPE!! THIS, THIS INCOMPARABLE DARKNESS OF ACADEMY CITY, WAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA!!”

An explosion could be heard.

The lance was swung.

At that moment,

Hamazura Shiage regretted. He regretted thinking that it had been over and getting out of the powered suit; he regretted seeing Kuroyoru Umidori like that and forgetting that she could still launch a fatal attack at a kid; he regretted that he could have settled this without killing so many people and yet chose the most redundant method; he regretted that he was not the one who ended up in danger, but Fremea, who believed in him so much.

Accelerator was beyond angry, so angry that he mocked Kuroyoru's wavering sense of living. That excessive talk regained her real nature, and under this situation, he actually presented the option to 'attack' at her. He could only feel angry about this.

They were both the same.

They had not made the final choice adequately.

(...Damn it...)

Hamazura gritted his teeth and intended to stop Kuroyoru, but it was too late. Besides, even when he wearing the unique clothing, it was hard for Hamazura to act as a shield without Five Over.

(...So in the end, a supporting character like me is unable to finish everything like a hero!!)

He moved to block all the 'lances'.

No matter what, Hamazura only cared about charging forward.

A storm was whipped up.

He could only stare and watch the last chance pass by his eyes. He was absorbed in the aftershock of the storm, slowly closing his eyes.

The color of despair clouded his vision.

He felt that all he had done up till now was completely destroyed by this one strike.

Fremea Seivelun couldn't be saved anymore.

He chose the wrong winning and losing conditions.

It was not his win even though he had beaten Silver Cross and Kuroyoru.

He had actually forgotten that the simple objective of protecting Fremea Seivelun's life and smile would be the real victory. Beating Five Over, beating Kuroyoru, normally speaking, these were useless.

He had thought that he could protect.

He had thought that Fremea would be safe once he beat a strong enemy.

But in the end...

"DDDDAAAAAMMMMMNNNNNN IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!!"

A scream full of despair.

But at that moment,

Hamazura noticed it.

The sound of the lance being swung.

But not just that.

The sound of the abandoned building collapsing wasn't heard.

(What...?)

Trembling, he opened his eyes.

A strange scene.

Truly, the 'lance' existed. It was several hundred meters long, and formed by compressing air together unnaturally. The block of violence would undoubtedly cleave the building.

However,

In reality, the building that Fremea was hiding in was completely unscathed.

It hadn't fallen.

What had stopped it? That one hit that Kuroyoru Umidori had let loose with all of her remaining strength and resolve?

It was a boy.

More accurately, it was the boy's right hand.

Kamijou Touma.

The boy with the Imagine Breaker hidden inside his right hand stopped the Bomber Lance.

The conclusion came quickly.

It blew the nitrogen lance that had so much power within it away, and Kuroyoru, who had thrown it with ‘her last hope’ lost it. She was really unconscious this time.

Complete silence.

A world devoid of danger.

He easily swung the right hand with the most inexplicable power in the world and said to Hamazura and Accelerator casually.

“Long time no see.”

EPILOGUE

A Modest Feast and Invited Dark Clouds.

Witch.

And so, the three of them had gathered.

Hamazura decided that they hadn't completely escaped the danger yet, so they took Fremea Seivelun out of the large vault. Specifically, Accelerator used his power to forcibly break the mechanism holding the vault door closed.

At first, Fremea panicked when she saw the door being forced open from outside, but relief seemed to fill her heart once she saw Hamazura's face. Finally feeling relief after being in a constant state of nervousness for so long caused Fremea to begin to collapse, but Hamazura caught her. She began to cry, and held him tightly.

"Sorry for butting in so suddenly, but what's going on around here?" asked Kamijou.

Accelerator leaned on his modernistic cane and frowned in annoyance before speaking.

"So you didn't come here because you were monitoring the situation?"

"I'm finally back in Academy City after so long and things seemed pretty noisy, so I just decided to check it out."

"Tch," #1 clicked his tongue.

Including that disposition towards misfortune, Accelerator just had the difference between their fundamental standpoints reconfirmed for him, but Kamijou couldn't read that far into what Accelerator was thinking.

Hamazura answered instead.

Kamijou's face became cloudy as he heard the explanation.

In contrast, Hamazura seemed fairly interested in Kamijou's right hand, as he kept looking at it.

“So, about that right hand of yours. Can you negate people’s powers with it?”

“Oh, that’s right. With you, it was a fistfight between Level 0s, so you wouldn’t have known.”

“Who gives a fuck?” said Accelerator, interrupting them. “You appeared at a time like this. And you’re active in a part of this world much ‘deeper’ than the scientific darkness we know. What have you gotten yourself into? Why did you return to Academy City now? Does it have to do with this incident?”

“...I think the actions of those Freshmen that attacked you were just a single step in some preparations.”

“Preparations?”

“Preparations for a fight against a new enemy... No, it’s actually more at the phase where we have to do some investigating to see if World War III really is over and whether or not this enemy really is new.”

Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage’s expressions changed at that.

Just like Kamijou, the two of them had been on the front lines of that war.

“Academy City is making preparations to fight ‘them’. The city is increasing their military preparations, of course, but they’re also fortifying the structure of the city itself and shifting in a direction that’s easier to fight from. You can think of all that as proof of how worried Academy City is about ‘them’... The city has determined that ‘they’ aren’t an enemy that can be taken on in their spare time.”

“Who are ‘they’?” asked Hamazura. “The only enemy of Academy City I can think of is Russia since they started that war, but they aren’t showing any intention of fighting anymore.”

“...This may sound like total bullshit, but will you believe me?”

Kamijou remained silent for a moment, and opened his mouth again once he thought about what to say.

“What if I told you that there wass a set of laws that could create supernatural phenomena that were completely different from the scientifically developed psychic powers used by Academy City?”

“What?”

"..."

Hamazura's question and Accelerator's reaction were opposites.

Kamijou continued.

"The people that freely control that different set of laws have created organizations, are doing all sorts of things in the dark side of the world, and are opposed to Academy City... Can you believe that? Can you believe that Academy City isn't behind every single mysterious phenomenon in the world?"

"Magic, huh?" muttered Accelerator.

Kamijou was surprised he knew that, but he continued on.

"I don't know the details. Strictly speaking, I'm a resident of Academy City. I know of the people on the 'outside', but I'm not a part of them."

Kamijou started to say more, but he suddenly stopped.

The reason was simple.

A small foot had shot up from behind him and forcefully sunk itself into the area between his legs.

More accurately, it hit him in the model human weak point.

"B-bah...!?"

"You just keep prattling on, don't you? Before you start speaking so self-importantly, don't you have the important job of bowing your head to those you need to bow down to? Really, how many people do you think you've made cry?"

Hamazura and Accelerator looked behind Kamijou.

A small girl was standing there. The blonde-haired girl who looked to be around twelve was accompanied by a large number of men wearing black. The color scheme of her chic blouse, skirt, and stockings made her look a bit like an old piano.

The short girl looked down at Kamijou who was deeply bent over, and told him,

"I'll explain the rest. You spend the time thinking up excuses you can give to the girls you made cry."

“Th-these people are... th-the people who pulled me out of the Arctic Ocean... Actually, it’s thanks to those other people over there who had been hidden in Russia, not the small cocky one in the middle.”

“She has an aura like my little sister,” muttered the girl as she pointed at Fremea. She then looked at Hamazura and Accelerator who had heard what Kamijou had said.

“I’m Birdway,” she introduced herself. “Leivinia Birdway of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. As you can see, I’m the boss of a magic cabal... Welcome to the entrance to a new world, children who have been made ignorant by science.”

AFTERWORD

To both those who are picking up one of my books for the first time and those who have picked up all of my books so far: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This is the first book of the new numbering. The first book is Science-only and Index doesn't really show up, but don't worry about that. The normal theory is going to be ignored quite a bit like that from now on, so make sure you check out how things are in this first volume.

The theme this time was technology that goes beyond a certain scientific line, and the book was basically powered suits and a cyborg rampaging around. The world in the series is divided between the science side and the magic side, but Academy City went beyond the line of the definition of the human body for two reasons. First, the problem they had was now on too large a scale. Second, after winning the war, they had destroyed the balance of the world.

Now about the Five Over. I feel that it is something that goes against the theory of a battle story.

But, as described in the novel, science and technology continue to advance, so what was cutting-edge yesterday may not be so today. I decided to put it in to demonstrate that.

Currently, the Five Over has a more powerful gun than #3, but, if the two were to fight, #3 would win due to application.

But that isn't an absolute, because science and technology will continue to advance.

On the other hand, #3 has a wall called the Parameter List.

I suppose I could say that this is becoming a world of the functionality of machines vs. the ingenuity of humans. Which is stronger, and how long will one side's superiority last? ...Now, I wonder how long #3 can continue reigning.

The cyborg may have been a bit different from what you, the readers, were imagining, but she got that way by this design process: I freely design the physical body -> I freely add in bird wings, fish gills, or whatever I want -> I decide what characteristics I most want to bring into Academy City.

Her battle strategy is basically asking the question “Which is stronger: one Level 5 or a thousand Level 4s?”

But the source of her power is still just one person, so it exhausts her quite a bit.

By the way, I think the first appearance of a clear cyborg instead of just a fake hand or a cane in this world was the short story by Narita Ryougo-san that was in a special volume of A Certain Scientific Railgun.

When writing the main story, I had wanted to bring in a cyborg, but I was worried that having cyborgs walking around Academy City would mess up the power balance, but thanks to him, I made my decision. I decided that it was okay for incidents like this to occur in a city that had Nayuta-chan in it, so I had a cyborg that had been altered for the war against the intentions of the creator of the cyborgs.

Thank you very much, Narita Ryougo-san.

One of them was a cyborg that altered her outer silhouette and the area her power could be used from while rearranging the inside of her body, and the other was a powered suit that altered the outside of his body and optimized the inside of his mind. As was stated in the novel itself, it’s rather hard to draw a clear line between the two. Which do you, the readers, feel would be harder to accept?

My thanks to my illustrator, Haimura-san and my editor, Miki-san. With a girl that carried thousands of arms with her and a sexy guy who wears the right thing at the right time, I feel that there were a lot of troublesome new concepts this time, but you two always stick with my selfishness, so thank you very much.

I would also like to thank Narita Ryougo-san for bringing cyborgs to this world and Akitaka Mika-san for designing the powered suits.

And a huge thanks to all you readers. The numbering may have been reset to 1 and I may have gotten carried away and made the first volume a more side story-ish volume, but I think I was only allowed to do this because of your support. I plan on doing whatever I want with the story from here on out, so keep on reading.

And now you will be closing the page.

I pray that you will be able to open the cover of the next volume.

And I will lay down my pen for now.

At long last, Birdway has joined in with the main story...!!

-Kamachi Kazuma